

The background of the book cover is a detailed illustration of a young man standing on the deck of a sailing ship. He is wearing a green beret, a white turtleneck sweater under a green vest, brown breeches, and striped socks. He is looking off to the side with a thoughtful expression. In the background, the ship's rigging and sails are visible, and other crew members can be seen working on the deck.

THE SECRET *of* JEANNE BARET

Based on a
true story

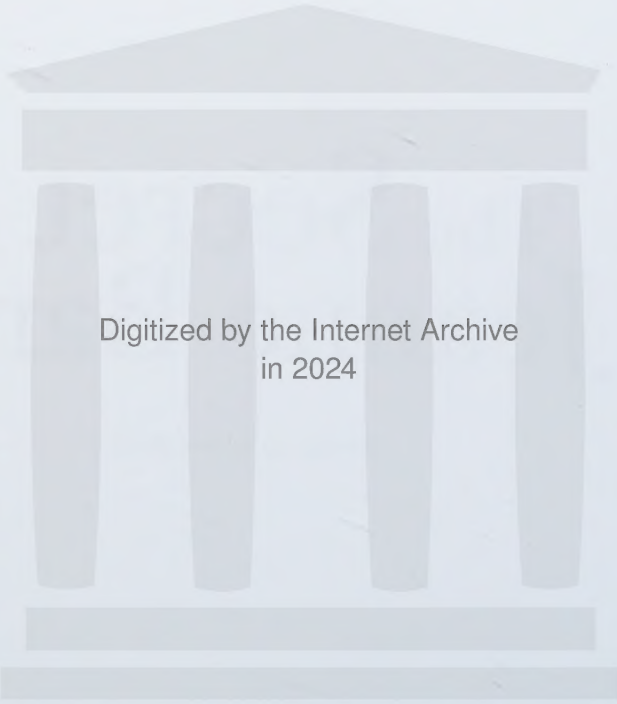
Helen Strahinich

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First Edition



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The Secret *of* Jeanne Baret

Based on a true story

*To my extraordinary husband, John Strahinich,
Professor of Hard Work, Big Love, and Impossible Dreams*

THE VOYAGE.

Rochefort, France to South America FEBRUARY 1, 1767-APRIL 28, 1767	Chapters 1-10
South America to the Strait of Magellan MAY 17, 1767- DECEMBER 8, 1767	Chapters 11-20
The Strait of Magellan DECEMBER 25, 1767-JANUARY 29, 1768	Chapters 21-23
The South Pacific to Tahiti FEBRUARY 5, 1768-APRIL 17, 1768	Chapters 24-30
Tahiti to the Isle de France MAY 27, 1768-OCTOBER 26, 1768	Chapters 31-40

AFTERWORD: Historical Perspectives on the Relationship
of Jeanne Baret and Philibert Commerson

A SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY, with annotations

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

CHAPTER 1.

February 1, 1767

Rochefort, France

My aunt slept soundly during our night at Rochefort Inn. Me, her dutiful niece, I was wide awake, dreaming of ships and pirates and adventure. Imagining, too, what it would be like to be a man on his own sailing the high seas.

Just before dawn, Aunt Jacqueline dressed and packed her bag. "Will you ever forgive me, my darling girl?" she asked in her usual dramatic fashion. My grandmother used to say Aunt Jackie would have made a great actor, if only she'd been born a boy. A decent girl, of course, would never choose that life.

"I really shouldn't be leaving before Mademoiselle Évert arrives," Jackie continued, as if reading lines from an otherwise forgettable play.

My aunt was in a hurry to get home to her daughter Lisette who was about to give birth for the first time. Cousin Lisette had a flair for histrionics, too, and the baby would probably take after both of them. And they could spend the rest of their days acting out their little dramas. That was fine by me. I loved my aunt and my cousin, and I knew they loved me. It was just that I was writing a different story, a vastly different tale. The mere thought of it made the blood pound in my ears.

Jackie's good-bye scene wasn't over yet, so I decided to play along. She hugged me tight, and I kissed her flamboyantly on the cheek. "Lisette needs you far more than I do," I said, with a fine sense of melodrama. "Now hurry along, before my beloved cousin has your first grandchild without you."

Jackie took my hand and squeezed it. "My precious little girl, I promise to visit you soon at the Gadeau estate."

"Don't worry about me, Auntie," I said, opening the door and practically pushing her into the hallway. "I'll be fine."

My aunt fought back tears and hugged me again before turning away. She really was a dear, but it was time to bring the curtain down on this parting scene. I closed the door and latched it.

"Thank God!" I said in a stage whisper.

At last, I could carry out my plan, none too soon, either. The first rays of sunlight angled in through the room's only window. Before long the inn would be bustling with boarders and visitors, including my aunt's dear friend, Mademoiselle Évert. I took a sharp knife and scissors from my trunk and placed them next to a small lantern on the dressing table. A cold wind rattled the window above the table.

I sat down, picked up a hand mirror, and gazed at my hair. This was the hard part. I wasn't especially vain, but my hair was my only good feature. It fell in golden waves down my back. My other saving grace was my skin. I'd never had smallpox, so my complexion was still clear. Many girls in our village weren't so lucky.

Otherwise, I was plain. My lips were too thick, my nose too coarse, my jaw too wide. Worst of all, I had these

dirty-brown eyes, which used to make me angry because my mother had these amazing blue eyes

On the street below the window, a carriage rumbled by and a dog howled, interrupting my reverie. There was no time to waste on girlish sentimentality. I picked up the knife, grabbed a handful of hair, and sliced. The sound made my teeth ache, but I kept cutting. My tresses dropped into a pile on the floor. Much to my surprise, my tears joined them. I never cry, but I was crying now, and laughing at the same time. It was a strange mix of sadness and pleasure. I couldn't help crying at the idea that I was hacking away at the prettiest part of me. Yet, I couldn't help laughing at the mischievous thought of the masquerade I was creating.

When I looked in the hand mirror again, I saw my dead father staring back at me. People had always told me I resembled him. Now I could see his face in mine. I was feeling anxious anyway, and this surprise rattled me even more. It got me thinking about my father, and how much I still missed him. But I had no time for grieving. My hair was a sight, like straw on a scarecrow. I picked up the scissors and set to work trimming it.

What would my father say if he could see me now? He'd have told me to do as Aunt Jackie said. My aunt had found me a position as a servant in a home just north of Rochefort —on the west coast of France hard by the Atlantic Ocean. Yesterday, she'd driven me in a buggy to this inn. I was to meet my aunt's friend, the head housekeeper, here this morning. Instead, I was plotting to set off on a course that my father and my aunt would both find unthinkable, if not unimaginable.

The last thing in life I wanted to be was a maid in some stranger's home. I'd heard too many stories about employ-

ers who overworked, underfed, or even beat their servants. Some masters refused to pay their maids for years of hard work. My girlfriend Carrola ran away from such a house after months of sleeping on straw in a drafty corner. She got tired of fighting off every workman who happened by.

Serving as a maid appeared to be the only choice for a girl in my circumstances. (That, or a life on the streets, which was definitely not for me.) My father had died six months before. A lawsuit against his pottery business left me bankrupt. I had neither hopes for the future nor a sou to my name. Until yesterday, when I saw a handwritten sign advertising the position of botanist's helper on a ship bound for the South Pacific Ocean. I knew right away that the ship's notice was the answer to my problems and my prayers.

This was no ordinary ship but the *Étoile*, the Star. She belonged to none other than Louis XV, King of France. Nor was the ship headed on an ordinary voyage. Everyone in the Kingdom had been talking about it for months. The *Étoile* was joining the Frigate *Boudeuse* in South America. From there, the expedition would sail south, through the Strait of Magellan, and around the world.

Few men had circled the globe. No woman had ever done it, not even the famous she-pirates, Anne Bonny and Mary Reade. If I survived — if I didn't fall overboard and drown during a storm; if I didn't catch a fatal disease and die; if my shipmates didn't penetrate my disguise and strand me on a deserted island—if, if, if. If somehow I made it through, I would be the first woman to sail around the world. Sitting there in the dawn's light, I realized for the first time that not only was I risking my life, but the odds against me were huge. I've always thought of myself

as a fearless person, but I'd never been truly reckless. Now, though, I began to wonder . . .

When I heard the chapel bell peal for morning Mass, I knew I was running late. I shook the hair off my lap into the pile on the floor. It looked like a dog that had been run over by a carriage. I scooped up my golden locks, shoved them into a burlap bag, and stuffed the bag into my trunk.

Then I took out a pair of my father's old breeches. The baggy pants still had his shape, and I could smell his scent in the wool. All of a sudden, everything was making me feel nostalgic. I slipped into the pants, tied a rope around my waist, and stripped off my flannel nightshirt. My breasts were normal size, but now they seemed huge and sure to give me away. I wrapped a cotton scarf across my back and so tight over my chest that it hurt, which made me feel much better. A woolen smock and an oily sweater completed my costume.

As I sat on the lumpy bed to put on my socks and boots, somebody tapped on the door. "Mademoiselle Baret," a woman called.

Her voice froze me. I held my breath, praying she'd go away.

The woman called again. "Mademoiselle Baret, are you awake? It's Mademoiselle Évert, from the Gadeau estate." She paused before rapping on the door a second time.

I ignored her: I couldn't face the housekeeper in my disguise or let her quiz me through the door. She knocked one more time before stepping away.

And then I couldn't move. Mademoiselle Évert's short visit had amplified my doubts: I was insane to turn my back on safe employment in a good household.

Or was I? I had no prospects, only dismal work and a dull, predictable future. I wanted more.

I grabbed the canvas bag that held my father's old clothes, my undergarments, some scarves, and a journal that I planned to fill with my adventures. I wrapped the knife in a thick sock, pushed it into the bag along with my brush and scissors, and put the bag by the door.

I slipped a letter to my aunt inside my trunk. Next to the letter, I laid my silver mirror, which had belonged to my mother. A rush of sadness cut my chest as I closed the lid over the mirror. For an instant, I had the strangest thought, or rather a feeling of guilt for resenting my mother's blue eyes. I put a short note to Mademoiselle Évert on top of my trunk, explaining that I had left for an extraordinary opportunity. I asked for her blessing—as if she was going to be ecstatic about being stood up—and begged her to send my trunk to Aunt Jacqueline, her old friend.

Time to leave. I grabbed my bedroll, my bag, a wool cap, and a coat. A wayward thought stopped me. I pulled a lacey blouse, my favorite dress, and a pair of leather slippers from my trunk, and stuffed them in my canvas bag.

As soon as I unlatched the door and stepped into the shadowy hallway, I knew something was wrong. The burly innkeeper was advancing toward me, a tall woman in a bonnet following close behind. Oh, God, they caught me already, before I even laid eyes on the *Étoile*.

The innkeeper reached me and growled, "Who are you? Whadya doin' here?"

I didn't understand him at first. No one else was in the hallway.

"I'm talkin' to *you*, young man!" he snarled into my face. "I asked whadya doin' here? You're not a guest."

I paused and took a breath, uncertain what to say. "I—eh, I came to visit M-m-Mademoiselle Baret," I answered

in the lowest voice I could muster, which given my fear, wasn't very low at all.

His beefy face turned red. My disguise was working—a little too well—and I braced for his fist. Maybe he wondered why I smiled because he lowered his hand. He growled like a guard dog, shoved me aside, and marched into my room. I heard him tramping around in his dirty boots.

I wanted to dash off, but Mademoiselle Évert was blocking my exit. The innkeeper shouted to her from the bedroom, "Nobody's here, but there's a letter for you."

He came to the door and yelled at me: "You said you came to see Mademoiselle Baret. Do you know where she went?"

I didn't trust my voice, so I just shook my head.

"Her trunk's still here," the innkeeper said, turning back to Mademoiselle Évert.

"I'd like to see the letter she left me."

As soon as my aunt's friend slipped past me, I ran down the hall, down the steps, and out the door. I didn't stop running until I reached the Port de Soleil, the entrance to the Charente River.

At that moment, a mischievous thought crossed my mind: I had inadvertently compromised my own good name as a chaste maiden. My aunt would surely hear about the mysterious young man seen stealing from her wicked niece's room at all hours. Not that the truth would offer her much comfort.

Just ahead of me, hundreds of masts towered like a great winter forest. I was walking now. I think I was swaggering even.

CHAPTER 2.

Same Day
Port de Soleil
Rochefort, France

Snow crunched under my boots as I jogged along a path to the long wharf on the Charente River. Ice floated along the edge of the river. Wind gusted through branches of old oaks. The frigid air stung my face and lungs. When I reached the wharf, I was out of breath. I bent over and picked up a rock for good luck. I'd carry a bit of France with me when I went to sea.

Bobbing ships were tied up at the wooden piers. A boy selling loaves of bread told me that the ship at the second pier was the *Étoile*. When I beheld her, I knew that I was about to enter another world. As ships go, the *Étoile* was an aging dowager. She was also short and broad in the beam. Even so, she looked strong and sturdy, and her woodwork-ing was elegant. The face and torso of a sea maiden jutted from her bow.

This was the ship that was to carry me around the world, the first woman ever to do so. For me, it was love at first sight.

I stared at the *Étoile* and then at the river winding down to the ocean. It was as if I could see my future unfolding before me. That snaking river would lead to adven-

ture—uncharted lands, dangerous creatures, maybe even cannibals and pirates.

A midshipman stood on the pier below the ship and barked orders at his men, snapping me from my daydream. I studied the gait of the sailors carrying crates from the pier to the *Étoile*. They swung their shoulders back and forth in a slow, easy motion but hardly moved their hips at all. I imitated them when I walked toward the midshipman.

Men shouted and swore at one another, as they lugged boxes and barrels up the gangway. Other sailors came down to load up crates. The midshipman suddenly turned toward me and snarled, "Whadya want?"

I lowered my voice to what I hoped was a manly pitch. "I'm here to see the Royal Botanist."

"He's expecting you," the midshipman answered. Then he called to a deckhand, "Go fetch Monsieur Com-merson."

The midshipman's statement stunned me. Why was the Royal Botanist expecting me?

Moments later, a tall gentleman in a long cloak appeared above the bulwark. He glanced at the midshipman and me and then surveyed the pier. A puzzled look crossed his face as he strode down the plank, looking left and right. "Good morning, Donat," he said, somewhat impatiently. His eyes darkened and his square jaw tightened into a scowl.

Midshipman Donat turned to me and then back to the Botanist. Seeing the latter's annoyance, he realized his mistake and stammered: "Ah, ah, pardon me, I thought . . .

Before I could say anything, the Botanist surmised why I was there and shook his head. "I hired an assistant yesterday afternoon," he snapped, addressing me and Donat at the same time.

Both men dissolved from my view. A trap door sprung open inside my stomach. I turned and staggered toward a nearby bench. I could barely keep from throwing up. Getting my bearings back, I cursed my stupidity. How could I have been so idiotic to think that, at the last minute, I could walk up to a ship like the *Étoile* and expect to get hired by His Majesty's Botanist—on my maiden voyage no less? I could see my father shaking his head, as he usually did when I behaved impulsively. "Jeanne, how many times do I have to tell you? Think ahead. Plan ahead." And how many times had I gone deaf on him, pretending to listen but intent on doing things my way. Indeed, I liked the idea of making up my life as I went along. It was more exciting that way, at least when it worked out.

Sitting on the bench, I could see that I'd been undone—or to be more accurate, I'd undone myself. Now I had to face up to the likely prospect of spending the rest of my youth as a lowly servant girl and the remainder of my dreary days as yet another anonymous French housewife.

I willed myself to picture the nasty scowl on the Royal Botanist's face. I could still hear his harsh, unpleasant voice. No doubt, he would have been an unbearable master. At least I wouldn't have to face that tyrant every day.

Now I had to figure out how to get back into the good graces of Mademoiselle Évert.

Just then I spied a young man walking up the pier, lugging a girl on his arm like a rucksack. The young man lumbered toward the *Étoile*, spoke briefly with Midshipman Donat, and waited by his side, the girl still clinging to him.

Moments later, the Royal Botanist appeared beside them, nodding to the girl and greeting the young man with a grin and a handshake. The girl let go long enough for a

quick curtsy before reattaching herself to the young man. I wasn't sure whom I felt sorrier for, the man weighted down by the woman, or the woman holding tight to the man. He spoke to the Royal Botanist, and the Royal Botanist's expression turned grim. He glowered as he raised his voice to the young man, but I couldn't make out the words. All I knew was the Botanist could barely contain his mounting rage. The young man and woman seemed to sense this. He bowed, she curtsied again, and they were soon practically running away from him.

The Botanist stared in anger and disbelief. His gaze followed the couple as they passed near my bench. Suddenly, his eyes shifted to me. In an instant, he was bounding in my direction, a scowl still contorting his face. I froze, unsure for a moment whether to stay or flee. By then the Botanist was hovering over me and his expression softened into pure disbelief. "You may not be the smartest young man I've ever met, but you're certainly one of the luckiest," he said. "It seems I have a job for you, after all."

I felt both relieved and scared. In a delayed reaction, I also felt insulted by the Botanist's remark about my shortage of brains.

"Something quite unexpected has happened," he said. "The young man I hired yesterday has retired today."

He slumped down next to me, shaking under his brown cloak. "What a week this has been. The first assistant I hired came down with the bloody flux three days ago. Yesterday, I hired that boy who seemed delighted to be my assistant. Now he can't stand to leave his bride. Apparently, the idea of spending two years apart from her was more than he could bear. He's decided to return to the countryside and work for his father-in-law. Honestly, it sounds like a prison sentence."

"A life sentence," I said, taking pains to lower my voice, despite my excitement.

He grinned, put out his hand, and said, "Philibert Commerson." Much to my surprise, his manner was direct and without affectation. Offering his hand for a lowly servant was a departure from custom and caught me off guard.

I pumped his hand as hard as I could, and then lowered my voice as deeply as I could. "My name is Jean Baret, sir."

"The job is yours if you want it, Jean."

I didn't hesitate, despite my recent misgivings about the Botanist. "I want it, sir. I *truly* want it. Thank you, Monsieur Commerson."

"Excellent," he said. "Now please don't tell me you have a fiancée to whom you must run and tell your good news. I will never again hire a young man in love. Love turns perfectly sensible human beings into fools."

Monsieur Commerson was right about that. I'd seen it happen myself. I laughed, making sure to keep it low. "No, sir, I have no fiancée—no family, either. I'm an orphan, alone in this world."

"Well then, your job will require some heavy lifting," he said, looking me up and down, barely concealing his doubts about my strength. "Have you ever carried large loads?"

I puffed up my shoulders and chest. "Oh yes, sir. I was a potter's apprentice. I can easily lug forty, fifty, even sixty kilos of clay." It was mostly true. I had on occasion carried clay for my father, though my usual job was the delicate work, painting and glazing pots in my father's shop.

"Ever go to sea before?" he asked, squinting at me.

"No, sir," I said, my first completely honest answer of the day.

"I've never been to sea, either," he said. The wind whipped across the wharf. Monsieur Commerson shivered under his cloak and rubbed his hands together. "I guess we'll make a perfect pair—both of us on our maiden voyage. In any case, I can't be fussy now, can I? Our ship departs in a few hours."

The phrase "maiden voyage" brought an impish thought to my mind: If only he knew the truth of that term in my case.

Monsieur Commerson had a way of speaking that made it seem as though he was talking and thinking out loud simultaneously. Perhaps it was my excitement or my private joke, but I burst out laughing and then I couldn't stop. The Royal Botanist started laughing, too. His features softened and, to my surprise, he looked pleasant and youthful.

"Come on, I'll show you to my cabin," he said.

"Yes, sir," I said, lifting my bag over my shoulder.

When we reached the gangplank, the Botanist nodded at the midshipman. "Please do me a favor, Donat, and tell Lieutenant Caro that my new assistant is ready to sign papers. We'll be in my cabin."

"Right away, sir," he said, nodding at Monsieur Commerson but ignoring me.

Walking up the gangplank, I grabbed the rope hand-rail. My legs were trembling, though I felt overjoyed.

I followed my new master onto the deck. It looked like a cramped marketplace. Sailors were hauling boxes, chests, and barrels full of food and drink, ropes and canvas. There were dark-skinned hands along with the lighter-skinned sailors. These Negroes were probably freed slaves from what was left of the French colonies in the West Indies. Lines of men tossed goods from one to another, chattering

playfully or singing. All the deckhands seemed to be young — in their early twenties. At seventeen, I'd fit right in.

Some hands mopped the raised deck on the stern. Some polished the brass rails. Others were touching up the woodworking with black and gold paint. Some were coiling ropes. A few shouted, far up the masts. They climbed the rigging as easily as if they were walking up a staircase. Others tended the chickens, ducks, geese, goats, and pigs in the pen at the middle of the deck. Still others picked up animal droppings and dumped them overboard. The main deck was noisier than a barnyard during a slaughter—and smellier, too. Later I learned that those farm animals would mostly serve the captain's table.

Just then, a loose piglet scurried in front of me. I tripped and bumped into a sailor who shoved me so hard that I stumbled into a mast. Monsieur Commerson grabbed my arm. "Get out of his way, Baret," he barked.

I rubbed a sore spot that was beginning to swell on my head. "Sorry, sir," I said. "That pig surprised me."

A deckhand standing nearby gave me a nasty look and hissed: "Sh-sh-sh-sh-sh. Don't ever say that word on this ship. It's bad luck to name any farm animals, especially on the day our ship's sailin'."

The Royal Botanist shook his head and gasped. "Don't pay him any mind," he said. "These sailors are full of superstitions. I'm a scientist, and it drives me mad. The word *pig*— bad luck?"

But I made a mental note to be careful. No matter what this scientist believed, I didn't want to draw attention to myself — or to bring bad luck on the ship. In my experience, wives' tales and farmers' superstitions often held some kernel of truth.

Now we were stopped in a jam of crewmen. Two workers carrying a chest had just banged into a giant. The man was only slightly smaller than the ox that pulled my uncle's plow. He grabbed one of the offenders by the jacket and lifted him in the air. The second man jumped on the giant's back. They were all pushing, shoving, and shouting when an officer arrived with a club.

"Behold the crew from Hades," the Royal Botanist said under his breath. "I've never seen such a rude and rowdy band." He seemed to be right about the crew, but I couldn't suppress a grin at the exciting scene in front of me.

Just before we reached the stairway, I saw a man relieving himself in a hole and instinctively averted my eyes. Monsieur Commerson must have noticed my surprise. "That's the *head*," he announced. "There's no need for modesty on a ship full of men."

"No, sir," I said, though I knew I must find a quick solution to that particular problem.

The stairway was steep and narrow with ropes instead of rails and open spaces between each stair. I followed my master's example and descended backward, facing the stairs, like climbing down a ladder.

Crates, barrels, and cages with chickens crammed the holds along the sides of the second deck. In front of the stairway sat a large iron stove. A cook stood with his back to us, chopping vegetables. A feathered hat perched on his head like a nesting bird. He threw some turnips into a giant pot, stirred his soup, lifted a bowl of onions, and poured them in. Men passed down crates and boxes from the open hatchway above and behind the stove. The smell of the cook's stew mingled with the stink of unwashed sailors, which didn't exactly whet my appetite.

I followed Monsieur Commerson around the stove toward the back of the ship. Through an open doorway to the left, I noticed men laboring over sheets of canvas—the sail makers, I supposed. Monsieur Commerson stopped at an entryway on the right to lift a tiny lantern from a hook and light the small candle with a match. "This is the officers' quarters," he announced.

At that moment bells rang.

"We made it back just in time," the Botanist said. "It's the end of this watch."

Men poured out of small rooms around the deck. The sail makers charged out the door next to us. Sailors dashed down the stairway from the top deck and went below.

We entered the officers' quarters and passed through a small galley into a short hallway. Light angled in from another stairway at the end of the corridor. My master stopped in front of a door and pulled a key from his pants.

His cabin was not much more than a crowded closet, about seven feet by nine feet. A built in roll-top desk and a low shelf were bolted down in front of the bulkhead—the side of the ship. A chessboard with thin rails around all four sides sat on a wooden crate by the desk. Heavy wooden boxes and chests full of the Royal Botanist's equipment and books crowded the room. Attached to the walls on the right and left were two narrow platforms. The smaller one on the left had a thin mattress and curtain. The larger one on the right held a thicker mattress. A canvas curtain was pulled halfway around it. Each platform had drawers for storage underneath.

"That's your bunk," my master said, pointing to the one on the left. He stepped toward his desk, put down the lantern, and draped his cloak over the chair.

I squeezed past some boxes and dropped my bag and bedroll on the thin mattress. And then someone knocked at the open door. "Lieutenant Caro," my master said, "greetings."

The big lieutenant seemed to fill the doorway. He appeared older than most of the crew—or my master—maybe thirty. He had reddish-brown hair and small, blue eyes. If it weren't for the pockmarks on his face, he would have been handsome.

He didn't even glance my way, which was for the best, because I was feeling a bit lightheaded. No wonder: Just three days earlier, I had sat in front of my aunt's fireplace discussing my future as a house servant. Now I was aboard King Louis' supply ship about to take off for the South Pacific with two hundred men. My master, the midshipman, and now this officer had all taken me for one of the boys. It seemed I had my Aunt Jackie's talent for acting, after all.

"I understand that Monsieur Commerson has *finally* found himself an assistant," the lieutenant said, by way of acknowledging me.

I said nothing, my gaze fixed on the floor.

"Well, then," the lieutenant said, stepping toward my master's roll-top desk and putting down a sheet of paper. From the corner of my eye, I saw him motion for me, and I quickly obliged. "Write your name or make your mark there," he told me, tapping the bottom of the document with his forefinger.

I picked up the sheet and skimmed it.

"You can read?" the lieutenant asked, his squinty blue eyes darting to Commerson and then back to me.

I nodded, yes. My father had taught me to read and

write when I was young, though his friends all considered it foolish to educate a girl. Most of the boys in our village were illiterate. But my father had no sons, and so he passed his love of reading onto me.

The lieutenant handed me a quill pen. I dipped it into the inkwell, and wrote the first four letters of my Christian name. I hesitated for a moment after finishing the single *n*: *Jean*. My name looked incomplete. Then I wrote my surname: *Baret*. In those nine letters, I saw the shape of my new identity. In them my past, my present, and my future came together. In them were truth and falsehood, misery and hope, boredom and adventure, the known and the unknown, an old world and a new one: *Jean Baret*.

CHAPTER 3.

Same Day
Rochefort, France
Aboard the Étoile.

Lieutenant Caro reached for my papers and turned to my master in one fluid motion. "I'd like you to meet Antoine Véron," he told Monsieur Commerson.

"My pleasure," the Botanist said with a nod of recognition.

"I'm headed for his cabin now," the lieutenant said. "Come along."

He glanced at me and said, almost as an afterthought, "Have ye been to sea, boy?"

Commerson broke in before I could respond. "No, lieutenant, he's a landlubber like me."

I could see a look of annoyance play briefly on the lieutenant's face, less with my inexperience, it seemed, than with the Botanist for interrupting. Even so, Lieutenant Caro took it all out on me. "Obey orders, work hard, and know your place, boy," he said. "I countenance no disobedience or disruption to the ship's routine."

"Aye, aye, sir," I said.

My master quickly picked up his cloak and wrapped it across his shoulders. He seemed to realize that the lieutenant was irritated with both of us. "While I'm away, put

your things in the drawer under your bunk," Commerson barked, mimicking Lieutenant Caro's imperious tone.

The door closed behind them, and I dropped into the chair by the Botanist's desk. Suddenly, the smell of fish, animals, sweat, and the day's upheaval overpowered me. I leaned down and vomited into a brass chamber pot alongside the desk. Sitting there with my head between my knees, it occurred to me that I was taking on more than I could handle. I didn't know the first thing about botany, much less a ship's routine. Likewise, I had no idea how to be a boy. Yet here I was, in the precarious position of having to learn all three at the same time.

To make things worse, this cabin was tiny. My uncle's mule had a stall that was bigger than our cabin. And my new master could be arrogant and rude. We'd be sharing these cramped quarters for many months.

I leaned forward and vomited again.

Through the retching, I could hear my father's patronizing voice (*What in the world do you think you're doing, Jeanne?*), which never failed to irritate me, and seldom failed to harden my stubbornness. My temper and my hard head had served me both well and ill in the past. I only hoped that they would help see me through the perils of this voyage.

My father, bless his soul, knew firsthand about my appetite for adventure, even if he didn't really understand it, or me. I ran away from home with a friend one summer, determined to visit Paris. To make a short story shorter, my father tracked us down before we got past the edge of our village. He was angry and said we were lucky no one had killed us. Later, though, he promised to rent a buggy and drive me to Paris someday. He never did. I like to think he regretted that almost as much as I did.

"Wish me well, Papa," I said, and then I heard the sound of a baby crying under the desk: *Meeeyew*.

Something small and rat-like jumped on my lap and dug its claws into my legs. A skinny, shorthaired cat flashed its green eyes and rubbed against my arm. I stroked the cat's blue-black fur. I could see that it was female, which made me laugh. There was another girl aboard ship to share my secrets.

I was determined that nobody else would find out about me. Other women had sailed on ships disguised as men. The English pirates, Anne Bonny and Mary Read, had lived as men among thieves and murderers for years. I'd read about their exploits with my father. Mary Read once took 40 lashes on her bare back, and her fellow pirates still didn't discover the truth.

I always wondered why the other pirates never noticed. But so far, the same thing had happened to me: I'd walked aboard the *Étoile* like any other deckhand, and nobody had given me a second thought.

Maybe I wasn't a scientific genius like the Botanist, but I observed things that other people missed. I'd have no trouble learning my way around this ship, and I'd be careful not to draw attention to myself.

The brass chamber pot, where the remains of last night's dinner now floated, was all I'd need for my morning toilet. I'd always been an early riser. That would work to my advantage aboard ship. I could relieve myself behind my curtain before dawn. An officers' stairway was just down the hall from our cabin. I could take the chamber pot to the top deck in the dark and dump it overboard.

I had another advantage, as well. The flow of my monthly blood was scant. Some months I didn't bleed at

all. My aunt believed that the blood went directly to my brain. She even worried that it might someday drive me insane. She had given me herbals to drink, hoping to correct my condition. Yet, I was content not having to worry every month about making pads from cloth strips, washing and drying them out, or keeping myself clean. Now my so-called abnormality would serve me well.

The cat purred contentedly in my lap. Yes, this would all work out.

I surveyed my master's desk, cluttered with books, papers, and letters. There were also two miniature enamel portraits. One pictured a little boy with long hair. The other portrayed an elegant woman seated in a chair. Probably his wife and son, I thought. The lady had delicate features, full lips, and large, intelligent eyes. Her expression suggested both confidence and grace. How had the Botanist ever won such a beauty? It must have been his wealth and fame. It certainly wasn't his looks.

I wondered why my master would spend two years away from his family. Perhaps his desire for adventure was as strong as mine. Or maybe his lovely wife was a shrew. The boxes of equipment and books suggested another reason: My master must be leaving his young family behind for ambition and love of work.

Monsieur Commerson was a botanist—the Royal Botanist, to be sure. The king was paying him a handsome salary to collect plants on his way around the world. That's all I knew about his occupation. But that might change. My master had a vast library. His shelves and boxes held more books than could be found in my whole village. I picked up a thin volume and flipped through. I'd have plenty of time to study botany and anything else contained in these books.

For the moment, I felt too sleepy to read. I undid my bedroll and smoothed it out on my cot. It crossed my mind that I'd left a mess in the chamber pot. I grabbed it, made my way to the top deck, and dumped it overboard. Upon my return, I threw a blanket over my shoulders and curled up on my cot, alongside the cat.

I'd only meant to close my eyes for a minute, but I hadn't slept all night. When I awoke, I saw my master sitting at his desk. Much to my surprise, he had left tea, bread, and cheese on a chair by my cot. He must have heard me stirring, because he turned around and said: "I see you've met Bandit."

I gave him a puzzled look.

"My cat," he explained. "I named her Bandit because she stole my lunch and my heart one afternoon not long ago."

I patted Bandit who was now purring in my lap.

I hadn't eaten all day, and I'd thrown up last night's supper. My stomach was growling. "Thank you for the snack, sir," I said, and then I wolfed it down.

Just as I finished, my master closed his book and stood up. "The *Étoile* will be setting sail momentarily," he said. He picked up his cloak and stepped toward the door. I pulled on my cap and hurried after him.

As we made our way, Monsieur Commerson gave me my first lesson in basic terminology, explaining that a stairway is called a companionway on a ship. This one was near the stern—the back of the ship. At the moment, it carried no traffic but the Botanist and me. We climbed it to the quarterdeck, the small raised deck that overlooks the deck. On the main deck—also called the spar deck or just plain deck—crewmen scurried about making final preparations. They tied and untied lines, readied the sails, secured the

livestock in their pens, lashed the last stores, and battened down the large hatches.

All 200 crewmen now stood on deck. Departure from a port required a "full watch," with every man at his post.

All this naval information must have been new to Monsieur Commerson, too, though you wouldn't know it from the way he conducted our lesson. I surmised that he could be a know-it-all. Considering my precarious position, I could only pray that he wasn't imparting any misinformation.

The lesson continued as my master and I descended a small ladder from the quarterdeck to the main deck. We pushed through a pack of crewmen to the bulwarks—the thick sides of the ship built up above the deck. Despite the bitter cold, the wharf was busy: A band of peddlers were hawking their wares. Ship builders hauled lumber. Other workmen repaired vessels in dry-dock. Sailors boarded ships, and those already aboard loaded cargo.

A crowd had gathered below the *Étoile* to see us off. For the first time ever, a French king was sending an exploration ship around the world. I felt a surge of pride, remembering how impressive the *Étoile* looked from the wharf.

The Botanist stood by my side waving back at the well-wishers on the pier. A warm smile brightened his face. My master was not as unattractive as I had first imagined. His green eyes were lovely, and he had a handsome profile. "Farewell," we shouted from the deck. "Farewell."

Winter hats, handkerchiefs, and scarves flew through the air. "Good luck!" the crowd yelled back. "Have a safe voyage!"

At that moment, I imagined my father with his broad

torso and black hair, towering over the throng. My eyes welled up. When would I see France again? My master had said two years, though it might be longer. The truth was I might never see my homeland again.

A cloud of doubt passed over me. My misgivings drowned out the well-wisher's cheers. But then I saw my father again and heard his soothing whisper—*You'll be fine, Jeanne*. I knew it was true: I would see the world and live to tell my story. The crowd on the wharf chanted farewell. Maybe, just maybe, they'd hear about me someday.

On the quarterdeck, a stately officer in a gold-trimmed jacket barked orders. "That's our captain—Captain Giraudais," my master explained.

At the captain's command, a petty officer raised a flag to announce that our crew was raising anchor. Then he fired a shot to warn stragglers to hurry. Moments later, some late-comers raced up the plank-way onto the ship.

I learned later that the captain is known as "lord of the quarterdeck." The title is well deserved: A captain's word is law on his ship. Every officer moves quickly to carry out his orders—or get out of his way.

The anchor was raised, the lines pulled in, and the *Étoile* slowly pulled away from the dock. The sails dropped down from the yards, wrinkled and stiff from disuse. They flapped lightly, and then grew taut as a gentle breeze filled them. The *Étoile* moved away from the wharf up the River Charente. Children and men followed along the snowy bank waving and cheering. I barely felt the dampness or the cold sea air.

I painted this scene in my memory: the Royal Arsenal with its white stone walls and snow-capped orange roof, the winter forest and the sprawling town of Rochefort, the

applause of well-wishers, the cawing of gulls, the rush of the blue-green river, and the thin spray of water on my face. Sunlight sparkled across the small waves of the river. Our captain stood near the wheel on the quarterdeck directing the pilot through the battery of anchored ships.

The *Étoile* picked up speed. The sharp wind made my nose run and brought tears to my eyes. The livestock had become silent in the pen behind us, and crewmen gazed from their lookouts. After a while, the Charente widened. The Atlantic Ocean lay just ahead. As we passed through the river's mouth, the seas became choppy. I turned back to bid farewell to France. Rochefort church with its steeple pointing toward heaven grew smaller and smaller and then disappeared. When the ship cleared the channel, the captain turned the *Étoile* over to the officer beside him. "Sail free," he ordered.

As I went below, the captain's words echoed in my mind: *Sail free.*

CHAPTER 4.

Same Day
On the Atlantic
First day at sea

I spent my first afternoon at sea helping my master organize his boxes. Some were full of books. Others contained equipment, such as plant presses, paper, gauzy fabric, microscopes, colored pencils, paints, brushes and pens. The Botanist placed the most important items in his desk and in the long drawer under his cot. I took notes on the contents of each wooden carton.

"I hope you understand that King Louis is counting on me," he said, "and I will be counting on you. If we're lucky, we'll discover plants for food and medicine at some of our stops. That could more than pay for our passage—and make our king very happy."

"I understand, sir." I said, though I could hardly believe my ears. Just one week ago, servitude and boredom seemed my destiny. Now I was bound for the adventure of my life aboard a royal ship with King Louis' own Botanist.

We both jumped when somebody hammered at the door. "Come along, Commerson," a voice called. "We're eating."

"I'm not hungry," my master replied.

"All the officers and scientific staff are eating together tonight."

"Not I," the Royal Botanist answered. He walked to the door and opened it. "Ah, it's Lieutenant Caro again."

"Yes," the lieutenant said, "I've come to escort you to dinner. . ."

"I thank you, sir," my master said. "But I'm too busy unpacking."

"Unpacking?" the lieutenant said, as he entered the room for the second time today. "What could you be unpacking that's so interesting? Right now, the only thing I can think of that's more interesting than dinner is a woman." He stopped short, folded his arms across his chest, and pretended to inspect our cabin. He glanced from wall to wall and ceiling to floor. "You can be frank with me, sir. Is there a woman here?"

The lieutenant was grinning, his question an obvious joke: *Is there a woman here?* Of course, he had no idea that the joke was on him. For once, I contained my urge to smile.

Lieutenant Caro bent over to pat Bandit, who lay on the floor in front of the doorway. He didn't even nod at me. Indeed, he treated me like an extra piece of furniture. My lowly position in the ship's order, it seemed, would give me some freedom from officers' scrutiny. Which was fine by me: I hoped to attract no attention.

Monsieur Commerson was still laughing at the lieutenant's joke. "I know that some men live for food and women," he said. "But I have work to finish."

"Tonight you'll survive without work," the lieutenant said. "Come to dinner with me. That's an order."

My master saluted. "Yes, sir, Lieutenant," he said. Then

he paused and looked around the cabin. "Now where did I put my scarf?" he asked.

"On the box next to your chess set, sir," I reminded him.

He picked up the scarf and wrapped it around his neck. The Royal Botanist followed the lieutenant to the door. Then he stopped, turned to me, and said: "You ought to come and get a plate, Jean."

"Yes, sir," I said. His kindness surprised me. Mostly, he had been gruff and distant. I grabbed my coat and followed.

Lieutenant Caro escorted us down the short hallway. My master and I had trouble keeping our footing in the heeling ship. We had to walk with our shoulders pressed against the bulkhead. By contrast, Lieutenant Caro walked through the plunging ship like a gentleman strolling his estate. His shoulders never touched the bulkhead. He looked back at my master and smiled sympathetically. "You'll get your sea legs soon," he said.

"Not soon enough," Monsieur Commerson replied.

We climbed the officers' companionway to the quarterdeck of the *Étoile*. In the dark, I forgot to stoop as I exited the staircase. I banged my head, but I had to keep moving to stay up with my master.

A damp wind whistled across the quarterdeck. Shivering, I pulled my coat around my neck. A million stars sparkled and throbbed overhead. The moon lit up the deck below. The crewmen moved at a slow, deliberate pace as they tended to the lines, studied the horizon, and fed the livestock in the central pen. At that moment, it struck me that I was a part of this crew. My world was getting bigger by the moment.

As we crossed the quarterdeck, I noticed somebody gazing at the stars through an odd-looking telescope. My master must have seen him, too. "Ah, there's Véron hard at work," he said, "a man after my own heart."

"Using a sextant on a rolling ship can be tricky," Lieutenant Caro said, smirking. "I bet he's struggling."

"An experienced astronomer is used to working in the elements," my master said. "He'll get used to it quickly."

The lieutenant shrugged and called out, "Come to dinner, Véron. Captain Giraudais is expecting you."

"I'll be right there," he called back, without putting down his sextant.

I followed Caro and my master through a door into the officers' dining salon on the stern. It was directly under the poop deck, which housed the captain's quarters. A mahogany table with benches on both sides filled the dining room. The furniture was bolted to the floor. On the paneled walls were pictures of King Louis' many ships.

Most of the officers were already seated. Their voices hushed as they turned to check out my master, ignoring me, of course. The captain sat at the head of the table. Like Lieutenant Caro, he was older than most of the crew, probably in his mid-thirties. He had an auburn beard, light brown hair, and stern brown eyes. He still wore his dress uniform: blue trousers, a blue jacket with gold trim, a white shirt, and a scarlet vest.

"Those two empty spots are for you and Véron," Lieutenant Caro whispered.

As my master took his seat, the doors swung open behind us. A handsome young man with thick black hair and fine features entered in a rush and sat down next to Monsieur Commerson. I surmised that it was Monsieur

Véron, who had just been star gazing. The ship's astronomer would soon become my master's close companion.

The doors opened again. In hobbled the scrawny cook with his young assistants—including a boy with curly blonde hair. It crossed my mind that, under different circumstances, I would have enjoyed flirting with this fine-looking fellow. The cooking staff carried huge tureens of stew. Ridges along the edge of the table kept the cutlery and utensils from falling when the ship rolled. Another assistant came through with three loaves of steaming bread and bumped me with his elbow. He put down the crusty bread, while the cook proudly poured stew into ceramic bowls, to the oohs and ahs of the officers.

My master passed me a bowl of stew and a fistful of bread. "Thank you, sir," I said.

Before I left the officers' dining hall, I saw the captain rise. Everyone at the table stopped talking immediately. Their attention turned to Captain Giraudais. He lifted a glass of wine to toast his company. "First let's drink to our cook, Michel. He's been around ships so long he's seen everything."

"How long has he been around?" someone shouted.

"Don't quote me," the captain said, smiling. His eyes crinkled when he smiled. "But legend has it that Michel sailed on the *Vittoria* . . . under Magellan."

They laughed and shouted: "To Michel."

The captain went on: "I hope you all still have a sense of humor when the larders get low. Michel will do his best. But don't be surprised if you find a sock in your plate one day, or if the soup tastes suspiciously like Michel's old hat."

Michel grinned and lifted the feathered tricorne. It looked as ancient and grimy as he did. The officers roared.

Then Lieutenant Caro stood up. "Let's drink to Captain Giraudais," he said, "the greatest seaman who ever sailed the seven seas."

"To the captain!" they shouted.

Captain Giraudais smiled, bowed to his officers, and said: "Finally, let's drink to the Kingdom of France and to our great king, Louis XV, who has made this voyage possible."

As I slipped through the door, I heard them all shout: "Long live France! Long live King Louis!"

I managed to get back across the quarterdeck, down the companionway, and up the hallway to our cabin without spilling my supper. The smell of stew made my mouth water. French cooks are famous for their skill, and the *Étoile's* cook was no exception. I ate my serving, cleaned off my bowl with a piece of bread, and fed a chunk of beef to Bandit.

There were boxes of equipment still to catalog, but I felt too sleepy after eating. I spread my quilt and blew out the lantern by the desk. Moonlight angled into the cabin from the companionway, through slats in our door.

The scarf binding my breasts felt scratchy and tight. I loosened it and was reminded of Lieutenant Caro's joke: *Is there a woman here?* I could finally afford to laugh. No one, it seemed, had any inkling about me. My adventure was off to a promising start.

I patted the cat and closed my eyes. The movement of the ship was like a cradle's. The sound of water splashing the hull was a lullaby. That was my last thought before I fell asleep.

I didn't sleep for long. Belly cramps woke me up. My stomach seemed to be climbing toward my throat. My

queasiness grew worse with every rise and fall of the sea. I only wished I hadn't eaten all that rich stew. I leaned down and felt for the chamber pot, but it wasn't under my bed. I staggered toward the desk, searching on my hands and knees in the dark. Not a second too soon, I found it—and then lost most of my supper.

I felt immediate relief, but I also felt foolish: It seemed I couldn't keep down my food. A few hours at sea, and I was throwing up . . . again.

I lurched back to my cot and slipped under the quilt. Waves crashed against the ship. Cows and pigs screeched from the top deck, and sailors shouted. The taste in my mouth made me think of the slime that coated the public outhouses at the edge of our village. My stomach cramped, and I curled on my side.

Soon I was bent over the chamber pot a second time. It was getting full. I moved the pot toward the door. The contents sloshed back and forth, like the sea. I picked up the chamber pot and carried it through the door. Moonlight brightened the hallway. I took a few steps, put down the pot, and rested my head against the damp bulkhead. An officer came up the hallway and sneered. I gagged and threw up. The officer scurried off.

I made my way step by step to the officers' companionway, then up the stairs—twelve in all—to the quarterdeck. I emptied the chamber pot and returned to our cabin. My stomach was so empty it felt like somebody had scooped out my insides, but the seasickness was gone.

I closed my eyes and listened to the waves lapping the side of the *Étoile*. The ship's creaking reminded me of Aunt Jackie's old rocking chair. Even the ship's animals had quieted. I nodded off.

Not for long. Loud footsteps and laughter soon awoke me. The door opened and a lantern lighted up the room. My master entered with Lieutenant Caro, their voices loud and slurred.

Somebody banged into my cot. The lieutenant shook me. "Wake up," he growled. "You're needed on the pumps."

"Yes, sir," I said, sitting up. I felt woozy, but I pulled on my boots, grabbed my cap, and followed the lieutenant to the gun deck.

"When it's your turn, just do what everybody else is doing," he said before walking away.

A dozen hands manned the pumps or waited nearby to take over from a mate. Partners worked together pushing down either end of a thick oar—over and over with all their might. Dirty water churned up from the bilge, out the pumps, and onto the floor, where a stream of water sloshed toward the drains along the hull. The air was chilly, but the men on the pumps were sweating rivers.

Everybody kept chanting a work song, even the men who were waiting like me. It got us into the rhythm:

*Throw your weight,
Give your all,
Push the brine
Out the hull.
Clear the bilge.
Pump it out
Down and up,
Down and up.
Pump it out,
Down and up,
Down and up.
Pump it out.*

Bells rang and drums pounded on deck. "Watch's over," a midshipman shouted.

I followed the other men to the pumps.

It took a few minutes to get used to the strain of pushing on the oar. My muscles ached and my head pounded, as I struggled to keep up with my partner. But the work kept my mind off my stomach. Soon I got into the rhythm. After a while I didn't feel any pain. I was shouting out the work song and holding my own at the pumps. Watching the water slosh out the drains gave me pleasure. The job was strenuous, but I liked it that I was just part of the crew.

After a while, my mind went blank. All that mattered was keeping the bilge dry and the ship safe. Being a sailor on the high seas was much harder than I'd dreamed. I'd lost my supper, and now I was breaking my back. But I couldn't keep from grinning. Today was the most exciting day of my whole life —and my life, like the *Étoile*, was finally on course.

CHAPTER 5.

February 2, 1767

On the Atlantic

Second day at sea

Bandit's purring woke me the next morning. I heard crewmen tramping overhead and singing work songs, the farm animals' piteous howling, and officers shouting orders. I felt the *Étoile's* lurching and the crisp, cold air of the open sea. Yesterday's events flooded over me like a strange dream, but I was wide awake, and this was my real life. I was a sailor bound for South America and lands beyond. I forced down a lump of fear and excitement in my throat.

Every muscle in my body ached from hours at the pumps, but my seasickness had passed. The scarf that I'd used to bind my breasts had slipped to my waist. I rewrapped it and took care of my morning toilet, knowing that my master couldn't see me in this faint light.

As soon as I returned from the quarterdeck, I lit a tiny lantern and sat down to write in my journal. Before long, I heard my master stirring. "Get me the chamber pot," he ordered.

I passed it to him – just as he threw up.

"I'm dying," he whispered.

So now my master was seasick, and he needed my help. Last night, I'd suffered from the same affliction and kept it to myself.

I knew from experience how much men like to be babied when they're not feeling well. The Royal Botanist was probably used to having his wife jump up and bring him a cup of tea or rub his back whenever he was out of sorts. My father had been the same way, except at the end when he got so sick that he didn't want anything to drink or anybody to touch him. My master gagged and shoved his head into the chamber pot again. "I'm dying," he groaned.

"I'll get help," I promised.

I stepped into the hallway—just in time to see Monsieur Véron leave his cabin and walk toward the officer's companionway. The slim, elegant astronomer carried himself like an aristocrat.

Walking in the opposite direction, I left the officer's galley and nearly bumped into a young sailor with a huge torso and bowed legs. "Can you help me find sickbay?" I asked.

"Feeling poorly?"

"It's my master."

"What's wrong?"

"Seasick."

The bowed-legged man chuckled through his thick beard. His green-and-yellow cat eyes gleamed. "There's nothing the surgeon can do for your master. He's got to go through it like everybody else. The only thing that helps seasickness is dry biscuits, tea, pickles, or dried fish. The surgeon will tell you the same thing—so don't waste your time in sickbay. Michel's the one to go to about seasickness, not the surgeon."

"The cook, right?" I said, remembering the captain's toast from last night.

"He's probably down in the hold right now, fetching supplies for today's meals."

"The hold?"

The big man nodded tolerantly. "I'm going in that direction. Follow me." Then he put out his hand. "Jacques Jacain, carpenter's first assistant."

"Jean Baret, botanist's assistant," I said, feeling proud of my new title.

As I followed Jacques Jacain, I was still aware of the ship's rocking, but I kept my balance more easily today. My manly swagger was almost getting to be second nature.

We passed some sailors sitting on crates eating a breakfast of biscuits and cheese. Other crewmen were already at work, sweeping, mopping and pumping on the gun deck. A thin lad with sad eyes and a narrow, crooked nose stirred a pot on the iron stove. A gray goat by the boy's side nudged him with its head. The cook's skinny assistant looked up at the carpenter and me. I was bigger than him. I had broad shoulders and thick legs. My father always told me that I'd have made a good farmer, but I was grateful that I never had to work in the field.

Jacques led me to the central companionway. We hurried down and came out onto the berthing deck. The ceiling was so low that I had to stoop over. I'd never seen so many men crowded into such a small place. An ocean of foul smells washed over me. Half the crew was asleep on hanging bunks or in "swings," canvas hammocks slung from ropes on the ceiling beams. They slept four hours at a stretch, the duration of one watch. At the end of a watch, these sleepers would go to their stations, and men now at work would take over these same hammocks and bunks.

"This is where I get off," Jacques said. "Just keep going down. When you reach the bottom, you're at the hold. Michel should be there." Then he turned and walked away.

I continued down the companionway into the darkest part of the ship. When I reached the bottom, I was standing in a half-inch of muddy water. The ship pitched. I grabbed for a railing, missed it, and slipped in the muck. I stood up and wiped my hands on my pants. Almost no sunlight penetrated this far down the ship. "Michel," I called out. No answer.

As I stepped forward, I bumped into a crate. This low, dark room seemed to be packed with wooden crates, barrels, and chests. I wished I had a lantern, but sailors have to learn to navigate the dark lower decks without them. The danger of fire is too great to have men carrying around lanterns. I heard a rustling, turned, and felt a rat slip past my foot.

As I started back up the stairs, I heard footsteps coming down. "Michel?" I called.

And then two men emerged from the shadows in front of me. I recognized the giant from the fight on the top deck yesterday morning. The second man had a skinny face and pointy nose. He made me think of the rat that had just brushed my foot in the muck. Giant moved back to let me by, but Rat stopped me. "You're in my way," he sneered.

When I stepped aside to let him pass, I bumped Giant. He shoved me, and I banged into Rat. He put his face in mine, glared, and poked my chest with his forefinger. "Who do you think you are, hitting me like that?" he snarled. His breath smelled of cheap wine.

Giant just laughed.

Rat growled in my face. "I asked you, who do you think you are?"

I knew that every answer to this question led to trouble for me. "Nobody," I said. "I'm nobody."

Rat sneered, and Giant laughed again. "Even a nobody's got to learn the meaning of respect," Rat said. "And it's my job to teach the new boys about it."

I was boxed between Giant and Rat on the companionway with nothing but darkness and muck behind us. I had to get up to the berthing deck. Rat wasn't much bigger than me, so I faked a move to his left then plunged to his right. I pushed past Rat, but he grabbed my leg and I braced for a beating.

They shoved me back and forth. Each time I tried to get away, they pushed me harder. It crossed my mind that they could do anything to me down here, and nobody would ever know. My master didn't have a clue that I'd gone down to the hold. Only Jacques Jacain knew, and he'd have no reason to look for me.

I knew I had to fight back but stay calm. As they continued pushing, I looked for my chance to strike. Rat was smaller, so it had to be him, and it had to be hard.

I noticed that Giant was letting up, but Rat kept shoving me harder and harder. Finally I took a wild swing at his head and landed a solid punch. Rat slipped into a railing and I started around him. He rebounded, tripping me with his leg. Giant laughed as Rat dragged me to my feet and punched me. "You think you can hurt me?" he said. "You hit like a weak little girl."

His words cut me harder than his last blow. He pinned my left arm behind my back and squeezed the muscle in

my right arm. "What a weak little arm you got. No wonder you punch like a girl."

Giant laughed with him, but then he said, "We better get going before the next watch."

"We got some time," Rat said, "and I'm having so much fun."

Again, I pulled away and started up the stairs, and, again, Rat grabbed my leg. "Now you're really gonna be sorry," he said.

Before Rat had a chance to make me even sorrier than I already was, somebody called from the top of the companionway. "What's going on down there?" It was Jacques Jacain who'd sent me to the supply deck in the first place.

Rat and Giant each bashed me, as they slipped away.

Jacques Jacain raced to my side. "You okay?" he asked.

"I'm fine," I said, but my heart was banging so hard I thought it would pop the binding on my chest.

"You'll get used to it here," he said with a grimace. "By the way, Michel is on the gun deck. If you hurry, you can catch him."

When we reached the berthing deck, Jacques looked around and shook his head. "You'd think this expedition would attract seamen of higher quality. Thank heavens, this is my fifth and final voyage."

"You're leaving the navy?"

"I plan to marry the day I step on French soil again. I've finally saved enough to buy a small farm. I'll be my own master after this voyage."

"You're a lucky man," I said, though such a domestic existence held no appeal. Despite the dangers of my new life, I would never trade my new-found freedom for a dull, predictable marriage in the countryside.

When we reached the gun deck, the cook was still there, putting away some pots. He was a skinny man, and his hat was much too large for him. "Michel, this is the botanist's assistant," Jacques said. "He needs help for his master."

"And what's his problem?"

"Seasickness."

Michel shook his head and grunted. "Your master will survive," he said. "Nobody dies of seasickness, though they sometimes wish they would."

As Jacques Jacain hurried off, Michel poured a cup of tea from a pot. The cook had dark skin and bushy gray eyebrows and mustache. He had to be 50 years old, if he was a day. I couldn't believe that anybody so old was still working on a ship. Most crewmen were well under thirty. Michel pushed the cup in front of me along with some crackers.

"Just make sure he gets some of this down. That should help 'im a little, though the misery lasts longer for some than for others." As Michel turned and hobbled away, the large white feather in his hat waved like a squirrel's tail.

Before I left, I overheard two men whispering nearby.

"They never repaired her right in Rochefort," one was saying.

"For all the time we waited, they could've built us a new ship," another added.

"The captain's already got men on the pumps all day long."

"We should've left with the *Boudeuse* in November. We might as well have pumped our way to South America in the first place."

"Why don't Giraudais get it over with now and toss his extra cargo?"

"Yeah, maybe the ship wouldn't ride so low."

"What's he going to do when the weather gets worse?"

"He'll have every soul on the pumps."

"The captain's sure pressin' his luck."

The men moved on. I picked up the tea and crackers and headed back to my master. He would never know what trouble his tea and crackers had cost me. In fact, he'd probably be annoyed that I'd taken so long and returned with so little.

CHAPTER 6.

February 14, 1767

On the Atlantic

Two weeks at sea

After two weeks at sea, the softness had vanished from my voice, my muscles were hard, and I was covered with a layer of grime—like everybody else. The ship's water was for drinking only, not for bathing. There was an ocean full of salt water, but nobody likes taking a bath in salt water. It's sticky and doesn't make any lather. I hadn't bathed since I'd left Aunt Jackie's — which was fine by me. The dirt and grime helped to hide my secret: Nobody could see the lack of stubble on my face.

Anyway, I was too busy to worry about bathing or not. Most days, Midshipman Donat put me to work pumping the bilge, mopping the gun deck, or cleaning up after the ship's animals. Lucky for me, I had not been asked to climb the shrouds, handle the sails, or clean the head. I often helped Michel set the table in the officers' salon or prepare and serve food. And my master always needed me to organize his things, as he was still recovering from a long bout of seasickness.

I'd been trying to get my master's desk in order all morning. Now he was resting, so I could take a break and get some fresh air. It had been raining or freezing cold

most days, since we'd left Rochefort. The rain had finally stopped, and the weather was warming.

The sound of bells and drums signaled the end of one watch and the beginning of another. I waited a few minutes before leaving the cabin. As I came out of officers' quarters, I bumped into none other than Jacques Jacain. I hadn't spoken to him since my encounter with Rat and Giant at the start of our voyage. Fortunately, I hadn't run into those two, either.

"Hello," I said. "How are you, Jacques?"

"I been working like a dog," he said. "I only left the workshop to eat and sleep—and not much sleep, at that."

"Haven't slept much myself," I said.

"Nobody does on a ship," he said.

I laughed.

"Looking for more tea and crackers today?"

"Just some fresh air," I said.

"Well, your timing couldn't be better," he said. "They're about to serve supper on the deck, since the weather's finally decent. Come up and eat with me."

With all the storms, Michel hadn't been able to use the stove often for fear of causing a fire. The crew had been subsisting mostly on biscuits and wine these past two weeks. As botanist's assistant, I ate a little better. Still, a hot meal would be a treat for me, too.

We climbed the companionway to the spar deck, the ship's main deck. Some hands sat on crates, dipping their bread into tin bowls. Other men leaned against the bulwarks, the low wall around the deck.

"The captain wouldn't allow such a mess most days," Jacques said, pointing at the damp jackets, pants, blankets, and sweaters that hung on lines and over the bulwarks.

"Today he permits it for morale, to give us all a chance to dry out."

"I don't believe I'll ever dry out," I said. After a week of stormy weather, all my clothing was damp, including the scarf that bound my breasts. Maybe that's why they'd been aching.

A chicken skittered past me. Jacques grabbed the poor critter and handed it to the cook's second assistant, a thin teenager named Gérard, who'd been chasing it.

A crowd had gathered mid-ship near the main mast, around tureens of soup and a cask of wine. It was a "flesh day," which meant that our meal would contain salt pork or salt beef along with beans and vegetables. The smell made my mouth water.

"What's this?" a sailor complained. "This is a child's portion. I'm a grown man."

There was more grumbling. "Move on."

"Get out a here."

"You're never satisfied."

"Get goin'."

Then there was shoving, and someone bumped me into Jacques. "Sailor's vapors have turned them all sour," he said, scowling. "The bastards won't stop fighting. Frenchmen are a cantankerous lot. We don't take to the discipline of navy life. The captain should do more flogging, like the English do. Wages are too low to put up with so much trouble. Thank heavens I'm about to leave."

Suddenly, laughter swelled along the soup line, and again the men pressed forward. Jacques peered over the heads in front of us.

"What is it?" I asked.

"A sock," he said, grinning. "Some joker has thrown a sock into the soup pot. No doubt it was Henri."

Henri was the cook's handsome assistant whose blue eyes and blond hair always caused my heart to flutter. Henri also had a flair for mischief which I appreciated.

"It could only have been him," Jacques said. "Gérard is far too serious."

Nor was Gérard nearly as handsome or popular with the crew (myself included). Yet I felt sorry for him, as the skinny fellow was often the butt of jokes. Poor Gérard was always looking over his shoulder, expecting somebody to push or trip him.

Jacques and I took our bowls and biscuits and headed for the bulwark. A swell rocked the *Étoile*, so I reached my destination faster than expected. "You're in a hurry to eat, aren't you?" Jacques said, laughing.

We sat on some casks. A gentle wind swept across the deck. The bright sunlight warmed me. I looked up at the masts, the sails billowing. The rigging hummed with life.

Jacques must have read my mind. "Perfect, isn't it?" he said. "Moving along at three-and-a-half, four knots, light wind, sunshine, tasty soup . . ."

I nodded, dipping my bread. The soup had bits of cheese and beef, onions, potatoes, and carrots.

Some men pulled out fiddles and flutes. On clear days, music accompanied every meal. Since our departure, we'd had little music. Now though, a few young sailors performed a rowdy jig, while others sang along. Everybody was enjoying the sunshine for a change. Some men whittled, sewed, played cards or threw dice. Of course, they weren't allowed to play for money, not that they had much to throw around. When the jig ended, Jacques said: "Now it's time to go aloft."

"Aloft?" I said.

I barely got out the word before he bounded toward the shrouds—the strong rope lattices that support a mast sideways, across the ship—and started climbing up. I caught my breath and followed. Jacques waited for me on a small platform about thirty feet above the deck. The swaying of the ship made my stomach clench.

"Relax," Jacques said.

I didn't sit down or let go of the webbing.

"The *Étoile* isn't going to dump you over. I know it's hard to believe, but to an old salt, this is nothing. Just try furling the sails on the t'gallant in a gale—" Jacques pointed up—"now that's something to worry your mother's sleep."

"How do they keep track of so many sails and lines?" I asked.

"Every man knows that his own life depends upon his memory and his care. Before long, even the greenest land-lubber learns his way around the rigging."

Suddenly, the *Étoile* dipped. I clung to the shrouds even tighter. Jacques laughed. "This is as mild as it gets when we're not anchored. I said *relax*."

I sat down. "How many sails and lines?" I asked.

"We've got 25 sails and 229 lines," he said. "Sounds like a lot, but once you get the idea, it's like recognizing your fingers from your toes. It's this simple: We've got three masts—the foremast," he said, pointing to the ship's bow, "the mainmast, and the mizzenmast, where we're sitting at the moment. The rest follow suit: the first square sails—three across—above the deck and below us are the fore, the main, and the mizzen.

"The sails just above us are the foretop, the main top, and the mizzentop. We use those topsails more than any others. They're the last taken in. They hold their place even

after the biggest sails—like the mainsail—come down," he said. "And that leaves the topgallants—the very top set of sails."

"Foretopgallant, main topgallant, and mizzen topgallant," I said.

"That's it," he said.

By now, my heart had stopped pounding like the waves. I took a deep breath and looked around. I couldn't see anything but water. White caps speckled the surface of the sapphire sea. Gentle swells rocked the *Étoile*. A purple hue filled the air. Grey clouds rolled by. A sailor's life was everything I'd dreamed of. I pitied women bound to home and hearth and whining babes, without a thought of the wide world.

"Great, huh?" Jacques said, interrupting my reverie.

"Yeah, it's beautiful up here," I said.

"I only wish Monique could be with me now."

"Your fiancée?" I asked.

He nodded.

"You miss her?"

"I do, but I know that this voyage will be the end of it. Soon I'll have enough to hire a hand and put food on the table for Monique—and any children we're lucky enough to have." He sighed, gazing at the ocean. "What about you, Baret. Do you have a girl back home?"

His question made me smile. Jacques grinned back, like he knew my secret. "I don't have anybody back home, except my aunt and uncle's family," I answered honestly. "My father died last year."

"I'm sorry," he said.

I shrugged and we got quiet thinking of home.

Below us, everybody had finished lunch. Some hands

were sweeping away crumbs or mopping the deck with vinegar. Others were touching up the bulwarks and trimming the edges with buckets of gold and black paint. Still others were tending the livestock in the center of the deck.

The pen was already getting empty. Stormy weather had taken a toll on the ship's farm animals, and many had gone to the captain's table. The captain and his officers always ate much better than the crew. In decent weather, their meals consisted of several large courses, including meats and dessert. As botanist's assistant, I sometimes benefitted from my master's position.

"Well, it's time to go down," Jacques said.

When I reached the deck, Jacques shook my hand. "Nobody can ever call you a coward again," he said, grinning. "Anything else you been wondering about?"

"The guns," I said.

"Ah, the guns. There are ten cannons in all—four on the deck and six on the gun deck. They're mostly for show these days – to scare off pirates and buccaneers. Truth is we don't carry much gunpowder, since we're at peace with England. If that changes and we have to use them, we will, though ten cannons isn't much. Our sister ship, the *Boudeuse*, has 26 guns, I hear."

Jacques picked up our empty lunch bowls. "Speaking of guns, let's go to the gun deck, so I can drop these off. Then I'll show you my resting hole."

We headed down the central companionway, as Henri was starting up. He had a baby face, a charming smile, and, of course, those blue eyes. He was a little older than me—19 or 20 years old. (Come to think of it, my saint day was just a couple months away: I'd be 18 soon.)

"Have you seen Gérard?" Henri asked

We hadn't.

Henri frowned. "Gérard just disappeared—left all the pots for me to clean."

I laughed. "For once, the joke's on you," I said, as Henri continued up the companionway. I grinned, imagining the scowl on his handsome face.

The gun deck was in full swing. Crewmen were sweeping and mopping, cleaning out cannons, and polishing the copper plating on the anchor capstan. Michel was organizing the cooking crew for dinner. Two men were peeling and chopping potatoes behind him. Jacques stopped at the stove and set down our bowls.

I hurried over, hoping nobody had noticed me gazing after Henri.

"The Botanist's Boy just climbed the shrouds," Jacques announced.

"So what'd you think of the view?" Michel's small black eyes shone under bushy eyebrows.

I knew better than to answer.

"You hung on for dear life, I'll wager." Michel laughed and I grimaced.

Just then, Michel's gray goat trotted over and rubbed his head against the old cook's arm. Michel protected his favorite goat which was almost like a member of the crew by now. It was one of the lucky few that had survived bad weather and avoided the captain's table. "This here's the *Étoile's* smartest animal," Michel said, slipping his goat a carrot. "Smarter than most of the crew."

"I can't argue with that," Jacques said, laughing. He turned to me. "Onto the berthing deck."

Dozens of men were sleeping in their branles, the "swings," suspended from the beams. I hadn't been this far

below deck since my run-in with Rat and Giant, two weeks ago. I was grateful that I didn't have to bunk in this low, dark room with the likes of those two.

I followed Jacques to the back of the room. "This is my swinging grave," he said in a whisper, indicating a hammock where someone else was now asleep.

Before I could answer, something crashed nearby. We moved toward the racket and found Gérard sprawled on the ground in a nearby hallway.

"What happened?" Jacques asked.

"I tripped and slammed into the bulkhead," he said.

"I'd guess you slammed into somebody's fists," Jacques said.

Gérard didn't answer.

"Who did it?" Jacques asked.

"I told you, I fell," Gérard whispered.

I thought of Rat who considered it his job to teach new boys the meaning of respect. Had he taught Gérard a "lesson"?

"Let's get him to sickbay," Jacques said.

We each took a shoulder, lugged him to the companionway and up to the gun deck. In the light from a hatchway, I could see that the left side of Gérard's face was swollen. Blood oozed from a gash over his left cheek.

Sickbay was on the ship's bow. The ship's surgeon was writing at a little desk by a tiny lantern. When we entered the room, he turned. He had a red beard, and a fringe of curly red hair circled his bald head.

"What happened?" he asked.

"He fell," Jacques said.

There were three sets of hanging cots along the walls. At the moment they were all empty. Jacques and I helped

Gérard to a cot. He opened his eyes and moaned. The surgeon stepped over and examined the gash on his cheek. "It's not serious," the surgeon said. "After he catches his breath, he'll have to get out of here. The men come in at the smallest excuse hoping for extra grub."

Jacques shrugged and shook his head, as we stepped out the door.

"What did the surgeon mean?" I asked.

"In sickbay, the men get better fare than the rest of us: eggs, chicken, butter, even mutton, plums, and rice. Some men try to fool their way in, but Gérard wasn't faking." Jacques shook his head again, and we parted at the companionway.

I paused at the entrance to officer's quarters to light a lantern. My master would not be surprised to hear about my latest adventure—if I bothered to tell him. He was convinced that we were living with a den of scoundrels, as he called the crew. That's what Jacques seemed to think, too, and maybe they were right. Myself, I'd learned a lesson again today about staying alert and watching my back on this ship. Yet, paying extra heed seemed a small price for this new life. Unlike Jacques, I was in no hurry to return to France.

CHAPTER 7.

March 21, 1767
On the Atlantic,
Near the Equator
7 weeks at sea

The kitchen crew always had their hands full, and they often needed my help. Today, I'd been working since long before dawn. We'd prepared breakfast as well as a special afternoon meal. The reason for the fuss: After seven weeks at sea, the *Étoile* was about to cross the Equator. This "crossing" was a major passage for any sailor. Or so I'd heard from Jacques.

The kitchen staff had other ideas about the event:

"It's just another excuse for the old guys to torture us," Henri said.

Gérard winced. "Me, they want to kill."

"They torture all of us," Henri said, shaking his head at Gérard. "But *you* let them know they're getting to you, so they keep it up."

"Easy for you to say," Gérard replied. "They don't really want to murder you—just to pay you back for all your practical jokes."

"They want to kill Botanist Boy, too," Henri said, glancing at me. "But you don't hear him bellyaching, do you?"

"That's because I'm dreaming of revenge," I said, though I hadn't come up with a worthy plan— not yet. But Henri was right: Rat and his cronies were always trying to trip me up, one way or another, though I knew how to take it like a man, even if I wasn't one.

As we put away the last of the pots, drums pounded and bells rang for the end of our watch. I headed back to the cabin to see whether my master needed my help. If not, I planned to write in my journal.

"Good morning, sir," I said pleasantly, as I entered the cabin.

Monsieur Commerson grunted but didn't look up. He was putting his chess set into a box for his daily match with Anton Véron, the Astronomer. Stepping to the doorway, he spoke to me for the first time today. "Come along," he said, still not looking my way.

I grabbed my journal and followed. That's when I noticed that he was limping. "Your leg, sir," I said. "Is something wrong?"

"Nothing serious," he said. "It's an old injury that flares up every now and then."

"Maybe you should see the surgeon," I said, regretting those words as soon as they popped from my mouth.

My master stopped short near the companionway, looked back, and glared at me. "I don't need *you* telling me what to do about my leg," he said. "I told you, it's nothing serious, and that means it's nothing serious. And even if it were, I'd never bother with the surgeon." He turned and strode quickly up the companionway.

My master had a temper. Sometimes it caught me by surprise, but I tried not to let it get me down. My father

could get cranky at times, too, though he seldom hit me. I was luckier than many village girls.

When we reached the quarterdeck, Monsieur Commerson took out his chess set and put it on a crate near the railing. "This is the sort of day I've been dreaming of," he said, sitting on a barrel and smiling.

My master's mood could change faster than the weather at sea.

I stretched, breathed in the salt air, and sat down to write in my journal. The sky was noble blue. The *Étoile* moved at a fast clip, her sails taut with wind.

"Bonjour, Commerson," Midshipman Donat shouted from the mainmast, where he was overseeing some repairs.

My master waved at the sandy-haired midshipman. Lieutenant Caro stood on deck beside the mast chatting and laughing with Rat, as if they were friends. Why wasn't the lieutenant kicking that trouble maker in the pants?

The sun was hot, the sky cloudless. My shirt prickled my skin. The scarf covering my breasts rubbed a sore spot under my right arm, and perspiration irritated the sore. Monsieur Commerson slipped off his gray sweater and then his brown linen shirt. He had a strong, athletic body. For obvious reasons, I could not remove my own top.

"I'm finally getting the chill out of my bones," he said. Then he looked intently at me. "You're sweating," he said. "You'd be much more comfortable without that heavy shirt."

I was astonished by my master's suggestion; he had never before offered me advice. I blurted the first words that came to mind: "I often get the chills, sir."

That was my biggest mistake of the day. My master was, after all, a scientist, and like any good scientist he was

always curious when he didn't understand something, so one question often led to another.

"I never heard of anyone getting chills in this kind of weather. What could bring on chills in this heat?"

I took a deep breath and tried again. "Ever since I got sick I've been susceptible to chills in hot weather," I said, hoping that Monsieur Commerson wouldn't quiz me about my "illness."

"That's odd. What sort of illness did you have?" Now he was interested in probing the exact causes of my strange symptoms.

Most days Monsieur Commerson didn't pay such close attention to me. He was a decent master, much better than I had expected when I met him at Rochefort seven weeks ago. Sharing a small cabin with him had posed no big problems. The Botanist worked all the time. He never troubled himself with my personal affairs—which pleased me, for obvious reasons. Today, however, he seemed determined to explore the unknown territory of my life, more out of curiosity than any concern for me, or so I believed.

I had learned that my master loved details, and I used this as a strategy for getting him off the subject of me and onto something else.

"They were never sure what made me so sick," I said. I began reciting details of my father's illness, pretending I was the one who had been ill. "It started out as a pounding headache over my temples and across my forehead. Then it turned into a fever and chills that kept getting worse and worse. After a while, I couldn't take down any food. Then my arms and back started aching, and I became delirious. That's when my friend Leona"—my father's name was Leon—"came over to take care of me. Everybody thought

I was going to die. Leona gave me sponge baths and forced me to sip tea. She hardly slept and never left my side. Finally, after four days and nights of delirium, my fever broke" —if only my father's fever had broken— "I soaked through two nightshirts, and by the fifth morning, Leona knew I was going to be fine. You see, by then my forehead was cool. All I remember is her hugging me and crying. I asked her what she was doing and she laughed. I don't recall anything else from that week."

My master didn't speak for a minute. He lifted a chess piece between his index finger and thumb and rotated it gently, gazing toward the horizon. He seemed to be in a trance. But when he turned to me again, his olive eyes were twinkling like the sea. "Is Leona your sweetheart?" he asked.

For some reason, everybody wanted to know whether I had a girlfriend. Though I didn't wish to encourage this line of questioning, it meant my masquerade was working, which cheered me.

My master grinned. "I knew it," he said, before I had a chance to answer his question. He thought that he was oh, so clever— just like Jacques. If they only knew . . .

"I don't have a sweetheart, sir. Leona is my aunt."

He raised his eyebrows and smiled again, as if to suggest that he didn't believe a word of what I'd said. And then he got distracted by a bunch of sailors who had stopped cleaning the deck and gathered mid-ship. "What's going on there?" he said, forgetting everything else.

He hurried down the short companionway to the deck and pushed through the growing crowd. Somebody had nailed a note to the mainmast. "What is it, sir?" I asked, following close behind.

"I believe that they're announcing their plans for crossing the Equator," he said. Then he read the note aloud:

*"To those of us who've sailed before
From northern climes to southern shores,
The signs today are bright and clear:
The moment of our crossing nears.
All virgins must gather now
For sacred baptism and solemn vow.
So, dear Captain, honorable and true,
Arouse your officers and lowly crew.
Advise them that the time is nigh.
Our grave intentions let no man deny."*

As if on cue, Lieutenant Caro arrived at that moment. "All right, men, clear the decks. You have one half-hour to prepare yourselves. At noon sharp, the captain will ring the bells. Be sure you are back here by then. I will have no malingerers," he said, doing his best to feign utter seriousness. "I expect the entire crew to be on deck—and that means *everyone*." He paused, looked at Monsieur Com-merson, and added: "That's an order."

CHAPTER 8.

On the Atlantic,
At the Equator
Same day

Monsieur Commerson and I returned to the quarter deck at noon sharp. Officers scurried by, and a noisy crowd gathered on the deck below. Anton Véron emerged from the companionway behind us. He was a little younger than my master, in his late twenties, I guessed. "Bonjour, Commerson," he called out. My master turned and waved.

Véron ambled toward us. As usual, he was dressed fashionably in a cream-colored wool shirt, loose brown pants, and silk vest. With his delicate features and dark hair, the Astronomer was more handsome than my master. The Botanist was more rugged and manly, however, and he had those beautiful olive eyes. I was appreciating Monsieur Commerson more and more—even his good looks, which I had once disparaged.

"I looked for you on the deck this morning," my master said, shaking Véron's hand. "We haven't had our chess match today."

"I hadn't forgotten," Véron said.

"Don't tell me that you're scared, now that I finally managed to win two consecutive matches."

Véron chuckled. "Last night the sky was so clear," he said. "I got lost plotting the stars and tracking the moon. When I finally finished, I felt a cold coming on, and so I slept in. Yet here I am, captain's orders." He turned his head, coughed, and blew his nose.

"Believe me, you wouldn't want to miss this ceremony," said Lieutenant Caro, who was passing by.

"That's exactly what the captain told me," Véron replied. "And I always trust Captain Giraudais."

Monsieur Commerson nodded agreement. Giraudais was popular with everyone aboard the *Étoile*.

"There isn't a better sea captain in the whole French navy," Caro said, squinting in the bright sunlight, his eyes narrow slits.

"Captain de Bougainville knew what he was doing, when he hired such a fine staff," my master said. "Present company included, of course." He nodded amiably.

Lieutenant Caro grimaced. His pock marks looked like deep pits in the sun's glare. "I never met De Bougainville. As far as I know, he's just a fancy aristocrat with top connections."

My master glowered at the lieutenant. "Captain de Bougainville is hardly *just a fancy aristocrat*," he said. "He's an experienced diplomat, a brilliant linguist, and a great swordsman. And everybody knows that he's a mathematical genius."

Véron chimed in: "And not just any mathematical genius. He was elected to the Royal Society of London, England's most prestigious scientific association."

"He was only twenty-seven at the time," my master added, "and a Frenchman to boot. Even our enemies recognize his prodigious talents"

"I still say, thank your lucky stars you're on Giraudais' ship," Caro insisted, rubbing the sweat from his cheek. "The captain is a true seaman. He's been sailing since he was a boy. That's all he ever wanted to do. De Bougainville may be a scientific genius, but he was not born to the sea."

"The *Boudeuse* is not the first ship under De Bougainville's command," my master said. "I believe that you're just prejudiced, because Giraudais is your friend."

"Other officers feel the same way," Caro said, crossing his arms. "If it weren't for his connections, De Bougainville wouldn't be leading this expedition."

"What in the world do you mean by that?" Véron asked.

"Everyone knows that Madame Pompadour is his friend, and she's great friends with the king," Caro said, his eyes roving mischievously.

Véron interrupted: "That has nothing to do with it, Caro. De Bougainville's a hero. He nearly died fighting the British in Canada. There wouldn't have been an expedition if it weren't for De Bougainville. It was his plan from the start — and clearly the king trusts *him* to carry it out."

"Being a military hero does not make him a great sea captain," Caro said. "I wouldn't trade places with anyone on the *Boudeuse*. I've got friends on that ship. I just hope they survive this expedition."

"I wouldn't worry about your friends," Véron said. "De Bougainville knows more about navigation than most seasoned pilots."

As it happened, Monsieur Véron had the final word. A sailor rang the bells. Lieutenant Caro bowed and disappeared.

My master and Véron looked at each other and shook their heads in disapproval.

"No wonder he's never made captain, even with his talent and good family name," my master said.

"With a loose mouth like that, he's lucky he's not in chains," Véron added.

At that moment, the bells rang again. Captain Giraudais sauntered from his cabin on the poop deck, above the officer's salon. Lieutenant Caro and six other officers accompanied him to the quarter deck. The captain wore a scarlet jacket with black cuffs, scarlet pants tucked into black boots just above the knee, a white vest with gold trim, and a black dress cap that curved over his forehead and swooped up above his ears. I hadn't seen our captain in formal attire since we left Rochefort seven weeks ago.

Giraudais stopped at the edge of the quarter deck and gazed at the crowd below. Everyone fell silent. "Round up the initiates," he commanded.

In an instant, deckhands grabbed my master, Véron, and me—along with many others.

"Put out your hands. All of you," the captain ordered.

An officer tied a rope around my master's wrists, then around mine. Another officer was doing the same on the main deck below us. They continued until they'd attached three dozen men to long lines like chain gangs. Deckhands threaded the ends of the ropes through hooks on wooden poles. The rope dug into my wrists and made my fingers tingle.

"Raise your arms over your heads, initiates," the captain shouted, as crewmates lifted the poles. We looked like laundry hanging from long, shaky clotheslines.

Some deckhands began screeching like wild boars and

banging utensils and tin cups. Others nested in the rigging, shouted insults, and hurled bits of fish. A smelly slab whacked me on the cheek, and then a bigger chunk struck my back. Could they be aiming for me?

A man, wearing a ram's-head mask, emerged from the companionway. Other strange creatures, coated with grease and feathers, trailed the ram-man. A second parade of feathered creatures pranced past us, screeching and howling. They carried a barrel to the quarter deck and draped goatskins over it. "Father Tropic, Father Tropic," they chanted. Soon the entire crew picked up their chant.

The ram-man answered their call, climbing the companionway to the quarterdeck like a king. He ascended his goatskin throne and stared at the crowd below. "SILENCE," he exclaimed, sweeping his right arm in front of him. "SILENCE!"

Everyone stopped chanting.

"All of you are trespassers," he proclaimed. "Do you understand?"

Unfortunately, I sneezed at that moment. Father Tropic glowered, and all eyes turned on me.

"Do you wish to enter my kingdom with a CURSE?"

My nose tickled, but I held back another sneeze. Father Tropic turned away and gazed upon the deck again.

"Repeat this oath after me," he ordered. "*Upon my honor do I swear—*"

He paused, waiting for utter silence.

"I said, REPEAT AFTER ME," he shouted. "Do you understand?"

Whereupon every soul dutifully repeated each line of the oath:

"Upon my honor do I swear:

*This solemn duty will I bear.
Should I cross the Line another day,
To others I will show the way.
Thus Father Tropic will accrue
Honor and fame, his rightful due.
I also swear by my life
Never to trifle with the wife
Of a fellow mate at sea,
Whatever else may come to be!"*

As we repeated the last line, it crossed my mind that this oath was not meant for me. A moment later, Father Tropic stood on his throne and shouted: "Now the sacred baptism begins!"

Feathered creatures began to untie our ropes. Two of them grabbed Monsieur Commerson, carried him down to the deck, and lifted him onto an oar over a huge barrel of salt water. When they pulled the oar from under him, he fell into the barrel and everyone cheered. When he came up for air, the creatures pushed him under again.

Finally, Father Tropic ordered: "Pull out the first initiate."

The Royal Botanist looked like one of the rats we'd found floating in a barrel of drinking water last week. His brown hair lay flat against his head, and his clothes were soaked through, but he was laughing and waving. The crew applauded my master, and somebody handed him a large cup of rum.

They seized Monsieur Véron next. The Astronomer pretended to struggle, and everybody cheered again as they dumped him into the barrel—fine woolen shirt, silk vest, and all. Poor Véron would probably be even sicker by morning. The creatures untied the men from the ropes,

one after another, and plunked them into the barrel. I prepared myself for the inevitable.

Soon two masked creatures grabbed me. One was thin and wiry, the other big as the barrel — Rat and Giant, I suspected. It was impossible to be sure, because they were covered with grease and feathers.

They hauled me to the deck, and soon I was under salt water. When I came up for air, they dunked me into the barrel again. I heard laughing and cheering. I expected them to pull me out after the second dunking, as they had my master and Véron, but they pushed me under a third time. I swallowed a mouthful of salt water and came up coughing, but that didn't stop them. I held my breath as they dunked me yet again. It seemed they were trying to drown me. How much longer would the officers let this go on? I'd seen Lieutenant Caro talking with Rat in a friendly manner. Was he looking the other way now?

Water went up my nose, and I swallowed a second mouthful of brine. When they finally pulled me out, I was choking for air.

The first thing I saw was Jacques. "Are you all right?" he asked.

I shook my head no. He chuckled and handed me a big cup of rum. "Drink this," he ordered. "You'll feel better soon."

I was soaked to the gills. My breasts were poking out of the scarf under my wet shirt—I could see their outline clearly. I stooped over and gulped down my drink.

"Can't complain about the rum, can you?" Jacques said, slapping me on the back.

"Rum's good." I said, slouching over even farther.

There was more commotion on the deck. Jacques

turned away to watch a line of feathered creatures dancing past us. A band of fiddles, flutes, and drums began to play. Raucous singing filled the air. The party was in full swing.

I slipped down the main companionway unnoticed. Or so I thought. Soon I heard footsteps behind me. When I looked over my shoulder, I saw men moving in the shadows: Rat and Giant, no doubt. I slunk into officers' quarters and thought I was safe, as regular deckhands never enter officers' quarters without permission.

But the sound of footsteps got closer. I picked up a broom leaning against a closet and gripped the handle. My plan: Count to ten, turn quickly, and swing hard. I slipped my left hand into my pocket and grabbed my key. After I struck, I'd race for our door and lock it behind me.

I was set to make my move, when I heard my master's voice. "What are you doing with that broom?"

I stammered a pathetic excuse. "I w-was t-thinking that our c-cabin was getting d-dusty"

"So you were going to sweep the cabin now?" Monsieur Commerson laughed. "I heard you took a brutal dunking. Did the salt water get to your brain?"

"It's v-very d-dusty."

Again my master laughed. "Dust or no dust, I think you could use this," he said. He handed me a bowl of beef and potatoes. I was taken aback by this display of kindness.

I slipped the key into our door, and my master took the broom. "Don't even think about sweeping the cabin now, though you're very enterprising to consider it." Then he proceeded up the hallway.

I heard mewing at my foot. When I opened the door, our cat slipped into the cabin in front of me. I put the bowl

on my master's desk and lit our small lantern. My clothes were sticky and dank. My master had returned to the deck, but I latched the door to be safe before stripping bare.

I put on fresh pants and shirt and dropped onto my cot. Were they really trying to drown me? Or just give me a scare? Sooner or later, I'd have to do something . . . I'd have to fight back.

I retrieved my bowl of meat and potatoes. Monsieur Commerson could be demanding and temperamental, but he had a good heart. I was lucky to be working for such a kind, decent man. I swallowed a bite of the tasty stew and gave Bandit a piece. A warm tingling moved from my throat down my chest. *I will never forget this day*, I thought, as I pulled out my journal.

I had crossed the Equator.

CHAPTER 9.

April 21, 1767

On the Atlantic

12 weeks at sea

A stomach ache woke me from sound sleep. At first, I blamed Henri. He had been in charge of last night's supper. Henri was the best-looking mate, but the only bad cook on ship. He had no talent for improvising, especially when supplies were low. After twelve weeks at sea, our larders were nearly empty. Henri's stew tasted like rat vomit.

But Henri's nasty brew had not caused my stomach cramps, I soon discovered. It was my womanly flow. I hadn't had my visitor for months. Luckily, I was prepared: I'd cut up old scarves and put the strips in the drawer under my bunk.

When I opened the drawer, I knocked a bucket over.

"Why are you making so much noise?" Monsieur Commerson growled. "No wonder I can't sleep." He'd had terrible insomnia all week, and his temper showed it.

"I'm seasick," I whispered.

"It never ends," he said crossly. Then he turned over in the dark.

I tended to my flow. Soon my cramps subsided, and I fell back to sleep.

The next morning, my master was already writing at his desk when I awoke. A pot of tea and crackers sat on a stool by my cot. Monsieur Commerson must have regretted snapping at me the night before. Through several bouts of seasickness I'd always helped him out. Today he was solicitous. "How are you feeling?" he asked without lifting his gaze from his notebook.

"The worst is over, sir," I said.

"Even so, there's no need for you to do kitchen duty today. I'll speak with Donat about it."

"Thank you, sir, but please don't say anything to Donat. Michel's been sick, so they're short-handed. I don't mind helping out. My misery has mostly passed."

I finished the tea and crackers before joining the kitchen crew. They were busy preparing a crate of rotting carrots for supper. After we removed the mushy flesh and black spots, little carrot was left. Michel's goat stationed herself nearby, hoping for a handout. I tossed some of the peelings to the goat. The poor critter was beside herself, now that Michel was not around to spoil her.

"Do you think we'll make it to Buenos Aires before the food runs out?" asked skinny Gérard, who was always hungry.

I'd been wondering the same thing.

"I hear the Captain is still holding onto plenty of supplies in his cabin," said Romain, a big deckhand who often had mess duty. He was always whittling in his free time.

"You don't think he'll share them with the crew, do ya?" Gérard asked hopefully.

"The Captain started as a cabin boy himself," Romain said. "He knows what it's like to live below-deck. Sure, he eats better than us, but he won't let us starve."

"Don't worry, fellas," Henri said. "The other day old Theo told me he smelled land. And that means we're near the continent. We should be there soon."

"What do you mean he smelled land?" I asked. I poured a pile of carrot bits into a pot of boiling water.

"Old salts detect the scent of earth and trees long before the rest of you landlubbers," Henri said, as if he'd been born at sea himself. "Even before the lookouts spot birds."

I never let Henri get away with lording his slight experience over the rest of us. He was only a couple years older than me, but sometimes he acted as if he were my father. "That sounds like an old wives' tale," I said. "I don't believe it." I stood up and grabbed some turnips from a barrel.

"You've been spending too much time with the scientists," Henri said. "Now you say everything is a wives' tale or superstition, like you're a scientist yourself."

"That is my plan," I said. I chopped the turnips with a smirk on my face.

"My plan, my plan," Henri mimicked. "You're always planning."

Gérard came to my defense. "At least Baret doesn't believe every word that comes from the mouth of an old salt," Gérard looked at me and grinned. "Yesterday Henri was going on about ramoras. You should've heard him, Baret."

"Ramoras?" I asked.

"Giant eels," Gérard answered eagerly. For once, he seemed to be getting the upper hand on Henri. "Henri says remoras suck on the bottom of ships. The old salts told him remoras caused the *Étoile* to leak." Gérard smiled at

Henri with a satisfied expression. "Pure rubbish," he added, laughing loudly.

"Today you say it's rubbish. Yesterday you were pissing in your trousers at the thought of giant eels." Now Henri burst out laughing. Of course, we all joined in.

"What's so funny?" asked Jacques Jacain, who had just come up the companionway.

"Another joke at Gérard's expense," I answered, holding back a guffaw. I poured the chopped turnips into the pot.

Then I noticed a thin silver band on Jacques' wrist. I'd never seen it before. Jacques saw me looking and answered my question before I asked it. "I was feeling around the bottom of my trunk for a pair of socks this morning, and I found a packet wrapped in brown paper. I hadn't put it there, so I figured it was filled with something disgusting—some moron's idea of a joke. But when I unwrapped it, I discovered this bracelet from Monique. She must have hid it in the bottom of my trunk. I guess she knew I'd find it one day while I was far away and needed a lift. Look, it's has our initials: *J. J. and M. L., always.*

"You lucky bastard," I said, using an expression that both my master and my father favored with their friends. And then my stomach cramped. My flow had not bothered me all morning, but now I was in pain. I must have grimaced.

Jacques gave me a sympathetic look and said, "Be patient, Jean. You'll find love one day."

"If you say so," I said, though I thought little about love, despite my secret infatuation for Henri, which was cooling by the day. I still agreed with my master's assessment that love turns sensible people into fools.

Jacques was not finished. "Often love finds you, when

you least expect it. Anyway, you have plenty of time. How old are you?"

"I'm seventeen," I said. "Or am I? What day is this?"

"April 21."

"Tomorrow's my saint's day," I said. "In a week, I'll be eighteen." I wiped off the cutting board, put it away, and took off my apron. "Well, I'm done here. I better check in with Monsieur Commerson and see if he needs my help."

"Before you go back to officers' quarters, dump this overboard," Henri said. He handed me a small bag full of vegetable rot.

I took the bag. A moment later, shouts rang out from the deck.

"Did you hear that?" Jacques said.

"Ha, ha, I told you we were near land," said Henri, his blue eyes flashing, as he shoved me with his shoulder. "Maybe next time you won't be in such a hurry to cry 'wives' tale'."

I shoved Henri back, tucked the bag under my belt, and raced for the companionway—along with half the crew. The deck was packed. Many hands climbed aloft to get a better view. Others stood on barrels and crates. I spotted Monsieur Commerson and Monsieur Véron on the quarter deck. Gérard, Henri and I pushed through the crowd toward the bulwark.

Thick wooly clouds filled the morning sky. Rolling waves tossed the ship. All at once, the smell of land and trees washed over me. It reminded me of tumbling through a barn filled with hay and manure, when I was a girl. Only this smell was stronger.

I squeezed onto a crate with Gérard. We all squinted into the mist, hoping to see a sign of land. Was it true? Was

South America's coast within sight? Or was this another false alarm? The scent of land was so strong, it was hard not to believe that the continent lay before us. And then I saw some trees peeking through the mist. Every soul on deck cheered: *Land ho! Hurrah! We'll be landing soon! Hooray!*

In the midst of the excitement, Donat arrived. "Come with me," he shouted. Henri, Gérard, and I followed him to the quarter deck. "Bring these down," he ordered gesturing at a barrel and a small crate near the railing. Henri lifted the crate, and Gérard and I took the barrel.

"It's from the captain's storage," Donat explained. "He says this is a moment to celebrate."

We passed out cups of rum and sweet biscuits to our mates. The men queued up, and the usual shoving and grousing followed. I saw Rat and Giant pass through the line and settle down near the main mast. They kept looking my way and laughing, which made me think of my dunking. Those two scoundrels had tried to drown me.

I pulled out the bag of rotting carrot bits—I'd forgotten to dump the mess—and placed a handful into two cups. If they tried to wrangle seconds, I'd be ready.

Sure enough, just as the line thinned, Rat and Giant sidled up to Gérard. Such a nasty duo. Beady-eyed Rat had a long, pointy nose with hairy nostrils, while Giant sported a stringy brown beard that resembled an old mop. They started to bully Gérard, demanding seconds. I poured some rum over the rotten carrots and handed the cups to my mate, who passed them on, unaware of the surprise they held.

I watched from the corner of my eye. Rat and Giant seemed to be congratulating each other on their fine workmanship. I saw Rat raise his cup to Giant. The big oaf hit

his cup against his mate's, and then they gulped together. It couldn't have been more perfect. Both men choked at the same instant. A second later, both spat out in unison.

I turned away and guffawed. "What's so funny?" Gérard asked.

"I'll tell you later," I said, but I couldn't stop laughing.

When I looked back again, a furious Rat was moving in our direction. A moment later, he pushed Gérard, who squealed, "What ye doing?"

"Don't play innocent with me," Rat said.

"I got no idea what yer talking about," Gérard said.

Rat pinched his arm.

Gérard yelped: "Stop it. Why ye always bothering me?"

I moved behind Gérard and pushed Rat. "Leave him alone," I said.

Rat scowled and grabbed my collar. "I should've known you were in on this," he said, "the little runt who keeps fancy company."

A crowd of crewmen stood in front of us now, so none of the officers would see Rat's mischief. He twisted my collar and pinched me on the cheek. "Still think you're better 'n everybody else?" he asked, squeezing tighter.

I struggled free and bit his arm. He growled and threw a punch at my head, but I ducked. Before he had a chance to strike again, Donat had returned. "Trying to get seconds?" he said, staring at Rat.

"I wasn't doing nothin', Sir."

"Then I have something for you to do. I was just looking for somebody to go on pumps. You're invited."

Rat slunk off, like the rodent he was. From the corner of my eye, I saw his friend watching. To my surprise, Giant was smirking. No doubt he was pleased about not joining his pal for an extra watch.

When Giant turned away, I stepped to the bulwark and dumped what was left of the rotted carrots. Seabirds dove for the scraps.

A sailor's life was everything I'd dreamed of. Nearly three months had passed since I'd left France. I thought of my Aunt Jackie and my cousin Lisette, so far away and in such different circumstances. Lisette was about my age, but already a mother. She had no inkling of the freedom and excitement she was missing. For me, every day was an adventure. The thought of my small victory over Rat made me grin.

But my satisfaction was fleeting: Rat would likely make me pay many times over for every second of misery I'd cost him.

CHAPTER 10.

April 28, 1767

On the Atlantic

13 weeks at sea

After we spotted the coast of South America, everybody expected a quick landing, but the elements didn't cooperate. Choppy seas followed a week of heavy storms. At the end of the week, the skies cleared. My master dug out hooks, lines, nets, gauzy paper, and alcohol. "Let's take advantage of the break in weather," he said. "I'll take the nets. You bring the rest."

"Aye, aye, sir," I said, pleased for a change of pace.

I hauled our gear out of officers' quarters and up the main companionway. A bag slipped off my shoulder. When I stopped to adjust the strap, a hard, moldy biscuit flew at my head. Though I couldn't see the culprit, I knew it must be Rat or Giant, trying to get back at me for ruining their drinks.

My master waved from the bulwarks. I hurried on and dropped the gear at his feet, whereupon he opened a box and pulled out gauzy paper and alcohol.

Monsieur Commerson must have seen my puzzlement. "I use the paper for pressing little fish," he explained, "and alcohol for preserving large ones."

A nostalgic expression crossed his face. "I've been studying fish since I was a boy," he said. "The Dombes, where I grew up, is a fisherman's paradise. Farmers flood the land during fallow years. As a result, many kinds of fish thrive in the marshes. Fortunately, my parents were tolerant of my obsession. They let me store boxes and bottles in every corner of my bedroom. I never did get over my childhood passion."

"I thought we were fishing for dinner, sir," I said.

Monsieur Commerson laughed. "Well, if we get really lucky . . ." Then he baited our lines with salt pork and threw them over the side of the ship. White caps raced across an inky sea. Spray blew over the bulwarks.

Some deckhands had also dropped lines. Their interests were not scientific, however. The *Étoile's* skimpy supplies were hard, rotten, moldy, wormy, or rat-bitten. My mates were hoping to catch their dinner.

"It's a wonder nobody's jumped ship," I said. "We're so close to shore." Even as I spoke, I could see the outline of trees through the mist.

"We're close," Monsieur Commerson said. "But not that close."

"You wouldn't believe the growling I hear, sir, when we serve breakfast," I said.

"Of course you hear growling," my master said. "Many bears are more congenial than this crew. The men of the *Étoile* are lucky that French captains hold back the whip. On English ships, they are much freer with the cat-o-nine-tails. Yet I can't blame these men entirely. Being hungry puts one into a temper."

The thought crossed my mind that my master was often grumpier than the bears that lived near our village

in France. Monsieur Commerson was a loveable bear, but a bear no less.

"Don't lose heart, Jean," he added. "The *Étoile* will be landing soon, perhaps even today."

My master's forecast proved to be woefully mistaken. Clouds grew thicker, and waves rolled higher. To make matters worse, the *Étoile* was now riding even lower than usual. Within an hour, we were racing to get out of the rain.

I had just put away our poles and nets when Midshipman Donat came to our door. "We're in for a giant bout of weather," he told us. "The wind's already coming in at twenty knots, and the sea is boiling. Stay inside, put out your lantern, and make sure you don't leave out loose articles. If the storm gets rough, it'll turn ordinary objects into cannon fodder."

"We'll take care of it right away," my master said.

As Donat hurried off, thunder crashed overhead. I blew out the light in our small oil lantern and helped the Botanist put away the day's fishing samples and piles of books, equipment, and paper.

Heavy waves rammed the *Étoile*. The ship rolled, and the wind shrieked. A giant wave crashed into the side of the ship. A silver cup clinked and clattered across the room. Another huge wave followed—then another and another. With each blow, the waves became more powerful. I braced myself against the bulkhead. It was hard to believe that we'd been fishing just an hour earlier.

The oil lamp hanging near the desk crashed against the wall again, and then flared for an instant. In the sudden brightness, I saw my master's face in relief, an unearthly white against the dark walls. His head seemed to float like a lantern held by a ghost. Then the light flashed off.

Men shouted from the deck, and footsteps pounded overhead. Somewhere an animal screeched. Bandit crept under the quilt. I reminded myself that we'd faced dozens of storms on our way across the Atlantic. The *Étoile* might be worn and leaky, but the old gal was sturdy, too. She'd hold up in this storm, whatever it sent our way. I patted Bandit and took a deep breath.

No sooner had I reassured myself of our safety than the *Étoile* pitched violently. I flew across the cabin, along with Bandit, my master, our mattresses, boxes of equipment, and everything else not secured to the walls. "Are you alright, Sir?" I asked.

"A little banged up, but no broken bones," he said. "You?"

"Fine, Sir."

I helped Monsieur Commerson pull his bedding back to his platform before resettling myself in a tangle of quilts. Bandit soon joined me. Though the storm still blasted around us, the violent pitching had ceased. After a while, I closed my eyes and tried to calm my battered senses.

And then I heard my master whispering, his words barely audible. "It's my son's third birthday today," he said, "and I may never see my boy again."

To my surprise, Monsieur Commerson sounded agitated: Bad weather had not upset him much before. However, he'd predicted a landing today, and now we were facing the worst storm of our three long months at sea.

He kept talking about his son. "My brother will raise him as well as I ever could, probably better." He laughed sadly. "I suppose I've been selfish. I was so out of my mind with grief after my wife died. I couldn't be much of a father then—I could hardly take care of myself. And now, well, now I've orphaned him."

I was astonished to hear my master speaking so openly about himself. I had no idea that his wife was dead. Maybe he was just thinking out loud, the way he often did while he was working. He had never spoken to me so personally before. He always kept his distance, as one expected from one's master. He never mentioned his wife, or his son, for that matter. I assumed that he was so involved in his work that it kept his mind off his family. This news was hard to take in: My master was a widower like my father.

I knew from experience that I couldn't say anything to soothe a man's grief when it struck him. And I wasn't even sure if my master meant me to hear.

"Poor fatherless boy," he went on. "If only I hadn't been so intent on proving my enemies wrong. If only I hadn't given in to my ambition. So what if great honors never come my way? They don't matter after all, do they, my poor, poor boy?"

He groaned and then grew silent. I was still unsure whether my master realized that I could hear him speaking. Though his anguish pained me, I was afraid to say anything that might embarrass him. I didn't want to add shame to my master's grief and guilt.

Just then, we heard a crash like a cannonball hitting a fortress. I heard screaming on the deck and feet pounding through the hallway. Bandit keened under my blanket. A moment later, Midshipman Donat appeared at our door again. "We need every hand on deck, Baret."

"Yes, sir," I said, standing up.

I heard Monsieur Commerson rise, as well.

"Oh, no, not you, sir," the midshipman said. "The Captain would never risk your safety in such a storm."

"What was that crash we heard?" he asked.

"A spar broke," the midshipman said, referring to the horizontal poles that help support a ship's sails. "It sounded worse than it is. They're repairing the damage now. No need to worry."

Midshipman Donat turned toward the hallway. I pulled on my boots, grabbed my cap, and followed. As I sloshed through pools of muddy water, I had to steady myself on the bulkhead to keep from slipping. When a powerful wave hit the *Étoile*, I stumbled, bumped into Donat, and almost knocked him over. "Sorry, sir," I said, as we moved from officer's quarters to the gun deck.

I followed Donat to the companionway, past dozens of crewmen pumping or waiting their turn, everyone soaked to the skin. When I reached the top of the companionway, a gust of wind blasted across the deck and nearly threw me backward.

I waded through a stream of water, holding onto the bulwarks. Many crates were tied down, but others had come loose, and unsecured boxes floated in pools of water. "Secure any loose boxes," the midshipman ordered. "Then join the pumping crew. The sea is still boiling."

I saw a man stretched out on the bowsprit, lashing down a sail that billowed dangerously. When the *Étoile* dipped, he was nearly swimming.

Rain beat down in torrents. Another big wave swept across the deck. Before I'd lashed down one box, I was drenched from cap to boots. My sweater felt like lead, and the scarf I used to cover my breasts was hanging around my waist. Would anybody notice? Not in this storm.

The wind howled in my ears. I held my breath as an enormous wave lifted the *Étoile* into the air. Some sailors were singing a hymn together, asking for God's help in this time of trial, which scared me even more.

A valley of water churned beneath us. I heard shouts overhead. Even in this mountainous sea, men were in the topgallants lashing down sails that had come unfurled.

A blast of wind threw me into my nearest mate, who'd been saying a prayer over and over. "Are you trying to kill me?" he yelled.

He stared at me with frenzied eyes. "If only we had a chaplain now," he said. "He might give us absolution. I don't wish to die with a blotted soul."

I wanted to say something comforting, but no words came. "Dear Lord," my mate went on, praying aloud as if I weren't there. "I'll light a dozen candles to Your Goodness, if You see fit to bring us to shore."

Amen, I thought as I grabbed another loose crate near the stern. Would we survive his storm? Would I ever see my Aunt Jackie and Cousin Lisette again? Just a week ago, I'd been feeling sorry for them with their predictable lives. Now I was facing shipwreck and premature death. Before long, my family might be pitying me for my foolhardy adventure.

Wild seas were still boarding the *Étoile*. Some crewmen were fashioning a sea anchor from canvas and wood. They tied an iron anchor to this frame and threw it over the stern, hoping to stabilize the *Étoile*. They'd already tossed heavy lines and another sea anchor over, anything to slow us down.

There was a momentary lull in the wind and sea. I'd lashed down all those loose boxes, so I joined my mates on pumping crew. They seemed pleased to have another hand with the unrelenting work. My shoulders grew tired and my ears throbbed. Would this storm ever end? I pushed the question from my mind. After an hour, I felt like I couldn't go on. But I did.

In time, we made some headway. First, the sea began to settle. Then the rain died down. The wailing wind turned to a breeze. Finally, rays of sunlight showed through clouds on the horizon.

Donat brought out mops, and we cleared the remaining puddles off the deck. "Good work, men," he said. "You can go back to your watches now."

I heard my mate, who'd been so busy with his prayers, thanking the good Lord over and over. I wondered whether he'd remember his promise, when we made it to shore, to light a dozen candles.

CHAPTER 11.

May 17, 1767
South America,
Rio de la Plata
15 weeks at sea

I was putting away some pots after another breakfast of thin gruel. The bells had just rung for the end of my watch. Jacques peeked into the storeroom. "Don't straggle," he said. "We're about to sail into the *Rio de la Plata*, and you're going to miss it if you don't hurry up."

"I'll believe that when I see it," I said, though I picked up my pace. It'd been a full month since we sighted the coast of South America—and four months since we'd left France. Stormy weather and rough seas had kept us from sailing into the river that would take us to our first landing.

Jacques stepped inside the storeroom to wait for me, but he seemed somber. "Something wrong?" I asked.

"Last night I had this terrible dream that Monique got the fever and died."

"She may be lovesick," I said, "but she'll recover the minute she sees you."

"After this voyage, I'll never leave her again."

I slipped the last of the dirty dishes into soapy salt water. "All done," I said. "Let's go up."

We arrived on deck as the *Étoile* sailed into the *Rio de la Plata*—the River of Silver. A sailor perched on the bulwarks, holding a thin rope with a piece of lead attached to one end. He swung the line in a large arc then released it forward of the ship. The *Étoile* sailed over the spot where the lead went down. "Ten fathoms-half," the man sang out before re-coiling the line and starting again.

"He's taking a sounding," Jacques explained. "The captain needs to know where it's safe to sail. With the lead and the line, he can figure out the depth of the water, locate sunken rocks, and learn about the bottom of the river. The lead picks up a sample of everything down there — pebbles, sand, kelp, or mud."

Our deckhands still had a thousand things to do, but they kept looking over their shoulders toward land. Some men stopped working just to stare at the strange sight: The *Étoile* didn't seem to be sailing at all. Instead, the land seemed to be moving toward us.

The nearness of land made other odd impressions on my senses. The grass of the plains looked greener than green. The dirt seemed redder than red. The flowery smell in the air was stronger than Parisian perfume. A church bell rang louder than the church bell at Notre Dame. A cart raced down a road faster than any French cart I'd seen.

"My imagination is playing tricks on me," I admitted to Jacques.

"Everything seems brighter and stronger than it really is—right?" He smiled for the first time this morning. "It's because your senses have been starved at sea—just like your belly."

"But it seems so real," I said.

"Of course it does," he said. "But just imagine how that

famous South American beef and warm bread will taste after all those maggoty biscuits and salt pork."

The thought of fresh food made my mouth water, and I could almost taste the juicy steak.

Jacques knew a million things from his days at sea. I was grateful to have such an intelligent, curious friend.

A log floated past the ship. The muddy Rio de la Plata looked like a chocolate field. "Do you know why they call this the River of Silver?" Jacques quizzed me, but he already had an answer. "Because of all the silver those greedy Spaniards stole from the Indians."

"I thought you were going to say it was because of all those flowers." I pointed toward the blossoms that covered the coast like a blanket of silver.

"Hmm, I like that idea," Jacques said. "Maybe you're right."

We passed Montevideo on the north side of the Rio de la Plata. Only a few ships were anchored in the bay of that small frontier town. The *Étoile* was headed for Buenos Aires farther up the river.

Just before sunset, our ship reached Buenos Aires. The captain had ordered a full watch —everyone on deck— for our landing. I'd been coiling ropes with my chums from the mess crew, handsome Henri and sad-sack Gérard. As the town came into sight, everybody stopped working and starting cheering.

Myself, I was bursting with pride. I'd sailed across the great Atlantic, and no soul had discovered the truth about me. My mates treated me like just another hard-working sailor. That distinction had earned me several companions and one true friend. I was slowly winning my master's trust, as well. To be sure, Rat and Giant still wanted to kill me, but

I could handle that trouble with Jacques at my back. My real adventure was about to unfold. I would see sights and visit lands that most Europeans could only dream of.

My anticipation was coupled with worry. Would my masquerade pass muster on land? What if my secret came out? What if we got shipwrecked? Or I caught a terrible fever? What if something happened to Monsieur Commer-son? What would become of me then?

A Dutch galliot, smaller and more rounded than our ship, came alongside us. Deckhands waved at us from their bulwark. "*Étoile! Hallo!*" they yelled. Soon we were calling back and forth. For the moment, excitement and joy extinguished my worry.

As Captain Giraudais stepped to the railing above us, Lieutenant Caro rang a bell from the quarterdeck. Everyone stood at attention and saluted.

"Congratulations, men!" he shouted. His curly hair blew in his face and he brushed it back. "We have reached our first destination."

Loud cheers interrupted this announcement and somebody shouted: "When can we go on leave, Captain?"

The men hollered in unison: "YES, YES, YES, YES!"

Captain Giraudais raised his hands for silence. "I know you're starved for fresh beef—and for the company of women," he said.

"YES, YES, YES, YES!" They cried again.

I shouted along with them, savoring my secret joke: These men had been enjoying the company of a woman all along. Only none of them knew it. Not even the Royal Botanist had a clue.

Captain Giraudais continued: "There's work to do, men. We must get the *Étoile* in shape for the next leg of

our journey and begin the job of reloading. It won't be long now before we meet up with Captain de Bougainville and our sister ship, the *Boudeuse*."

The men grumbled loudly, interrupting the captain. Lieutenant Caro scowled, and Midshipman Donat stepped into the crowd, wielding his club. Soon they fell silent.

The captain smiled as if he were in the company of young apprentices. "Patience, men," he said. "You should expect such disappointments. This will not be the worst — or the last." Captain Giraudais turned and stepped away.

"Patience, men. You should expect such disappointments," Henri mimicked the captain. "Fine way to thank us for risking life and limb."

"It's so unfair," Gérard chimed in.

"No good deed goes unpunished," Henri added philosophically.

At that moment, Jacques approached me from the other side of the deck. "I'm going to town with my boss tomorrow," he said, unable to suppress a grin.

I knew that he had a packet of love letters for Monique. At last, he could send them on their way. My master also had mail for family and friends. Myself, I'd written two letters, one for my Aunt and one for Cousin Lisette, who was now a new mother. I didn't even know whether her baby was a boy or a girl. I wondered whether my aunt had recovered from the news that I never met her friend, Mademoiselle Evert. Aunt Jackie and Lisette would be amazed to receive my letters from across the ocean—assuming the letters ever arrived.

Mail often took months to reach its destination. When you sent letters homeward on another ship, you could only hope and pray that they didn't become lost, ruined in bad

weather, misplaced, stolen, or sunk. Sometimes mail never reached the intended; sometimes it took years.

As Jacques stepped away, I saw my master beckon me from the railing of the quarterdeck. His newly trimmed beard filled out his long, thin face, giving him a distinguished appearance.

"Got to go," I told my mates, as I rushed to join Monsieur Commerson.

"I have good news," he said, his olive eyes sparkling "Captain Giraudais has promised to give me a canoe tomorrow. We'll be going ashore to hunt for plants."

I'm sure I smiled, but it crossed my mind that I'd never paddled a canoe. My master regarded me as if he'd read my thought. "You do know how to paddle a canoe, don't you?" he asked.

"I've rowed a boat many times, sir, so I'm sure I can paddle a canoe."

My master continued to stare at me. Had he changed his mind about taking me along? His gaze turned into a faraway look that showed he was lost in thought. It was as if he'd been transported to another time or place and forgotten that I stood in front of him. His eyes were on me, but he seemed to be talking to himself.

"I can still remember my first plant hunt as if it were yesterday. It was one of the great days of my life," he sighed.

My master's passion for plants had already inspired me. Most people enjoy the end of their workday, but not Monsieur Commerson. He often toiled late into the night, reading his books or taking notes by lantern light. His enthusiasm was so contagious, I now wanted to become a scientist like him and learn everything there was to know about plants. Last month, he gave me my first lesson on

how to press plants. I had listened closely to his instructions, taken notes, and reread my notes many times.

Among the officers, my master had a reputation for being a workhorse. Lieutenant Caro sometimes checked on the Royal Botanist and reminded him to take care of his health. *Pace yourself*, the lieutenant would tell him. *We have a long, long way to go*. But Monsieur Commerson's obsession gave him little time for rest.

My master sighed again, still thinking about his past, I suppose. "Yes, tomorrow our real work will begin," he murmured.

CHAPTER 12.

May 18, 1767
South America,
Buenos Aires Harbor
15 weeks at sea

The next morning, we packed boxes with firearms, forks, drying papers, plant presses, sketching blocks, and vascula, the carrying cases for new plant specimens. I also dug out the knife that I'd pushed into my bag at Rochefort Inn and stuffed it into my pocket.

Before we left, my master rummaged in the drawer under his mattress. "Where could they be?" he groaned under his breath.

"What are you looking for, sir?" I asked.

"I can't find my new walking boots," he said.

"You packed them in that black chest, in the second closet in the hallway," I said.

He went into the hallway and soon returned with his new boots. "Have you always had a talent for keeping track of everything?" he asked.

"My father counted on me to find things, too," I said, relishing his compliment.

"Why am I not surprised?" he asked, pulling on his thick boots and walking around the cabin. "The leather's

stiff," he said. "Unfortunately, I'll have to break them in today."

I pulled our boxes to the door, strapped the larger one over my shoulder, and picked up the smaller one. After four months of pumping and lugging crates around the *Étoile*, I was stronger than ever. These two boxes were nothing compared to some of the loads I'd been handling on deck.

As I followed my master up the hallway, I noticed that his limping had worsened. I wondered whether this was due to his old wound or his new shoes.

When we reached the deck, Jacques raced past me. "I'm late, Jean," he said. "Wish me good luck."

"Good luck," I called.

I hauled my master's boxes to the bulwark. When I looked down, I saw Jacques sitting in a longboat with several officers and a few deckhands. They were about to go on shore to order supplies and learn the whereabouts of Captain de Bougainville, the head of our expedition.

Jacques sat between two sailors. One of them was Rat. Jacques waved at me and I waved back, whereupon Rat saw me and snarled. I was used to his nasty looks, and I ignored him. But seeing him there next to my friend made my skin crawl.

Jacques shouted, "I'll eat a steak for you, Jean."

I smiled at his joke and waved again. Even so, I shivered with dread as the longboat pushed off from the *Étoile*. Jacques was grinning, but I felt uneasy as I bid him farewell.

Monsieur Commerson nudged me. "Come along, Jean," he said.

I moved on, still thinking about Jacques and Rat. When my master stopped short, I nearly ran into him. A moment later, Giant stepped toward us.

"He'll be helping you paddle the canoe and carry my gear," Monsieur Commerson told me.

My master's words almost knocked the breath out of me. The prospect of Giant's company was as welcome as another bout of seasickness.

And then Giant tripped over one of the boxes I'd just deposited. I stifled a laugh, and Giant scowled at me.

We stowed everything in a canoe, hoisted it onto the bulwarks, and used ropes to lower it down to the river. Then we climbed a ladder down the side of the *Étoile*. Giant settled my master in the middle of the canoe. "You go up front," Giant ordered.

After I sat on the small bench, Giant pushed an oar at me and started shouting instructions. I thought about my friend Jacques seated next to Rat, and here I was with Rat's pal, Giant, who was ordering me around. What a miserable way to start my adventure in the New World. For the moment, this change in circumstances had quashed my excitement.

Buenos Aires sat low along the shore in front of us. Farmers had cultivated a neat strip of fruit trees and vegetables around this town of squat houses. Beyond the gardens were miles of plains where huge herds of cattle grazed. Where had they all come from? Had they always roamed these grasslands?

My master must have been thinking along the same lines. As always, he was a fount of information: "Spanish settlers brought over cattle on their ships," he said. "They found few natural predators and more than enough grass on these pampas. Some cattle broke free, and *voilà!* Once they arrived, nothing could stop them."

We followed the shoreline past the edge of town and

paddled inland up the Cuelo River. Boats lined the banks of the small river. Workers unloaded crates, boxes, and barrels from the boats and hauled them up a trail.

"The vegetation looks promising here," my master said after we'd passed most of the boats. "Let's find a landing."

We paddled into a cove with a narrow beach. "Hold on," Giant said, as he drove the canoe onto a sandy bank.

Slipping off our shoes, we climbed into the shallow, muddy water. The muck squished between my toes and under my feet. This was the first time I'd stepped onto land in four months. I held tight to the canoe, as we pulled it from the river. The earth rolled and swayed under my feet. I'd been at sea so long I'd lost my land legs. I took one step at a time to keep the ground from rising up and slapping me in the face. Giant didn't seem bothered by it. He was an old salt, so he must have anticipated this odd sensation. At least that's how it seemed. I wouldn't know for certain because he hadn't spoken to me—except to shout orders.

As for the Royal Botanist, he stumbled forward a short distance, found some plants, and started digging. He didn't say another word. I think he would have gone on digging through an earthquake.

I stumbled while unloading the canoe with Giant. He looked my way only to scowl his disapproval. When we finished, he settled down in the sand, took out a packet, and fastened some fat to a hook and line. My master was preoccupied with digging plants. I staggered to his side and waited for instructions.

Finally, he looked up and ordered: "I need paper and pressing blocks."

Moments later, I returned with his gear.

"Do you remember how to press a plant, or should I demonstrate again?" my master asked.

"I remember, sir."

Plants have to be preserved quickly, so they don't dry up or fall apart. The Botanist had already showed me what to do. I'd taken notes on his instructions and committed every word to memory. Recently, I'd been practicing on small fish. He watched closely as I prepared his first specimen for pressing. I laid the plant carefully on a small sheet of paper and put another sheet on top. As I pressed the plant and the sheets between two wooden blocks, he nodded his approval.

Next, he jotted notes about the plant, its location, and time of discovery. I studied his notebook, and, after a while, he let me help with his note taking, too. I picked up this job quickly, as I'd been reading my master's books on botany. It was important to keep a detailed record of each plant discovery for the sake of other scientists. This information could help botanists find the same plants or grow them in different locations. Many New World plants, like squash and potatoes, were now common in Europe.

When my master finished digging in one spot, we moved to another, never stopping for a break. Within a few hours, he had dug up—and I had pressed—dozens of specimens.

At first, the plants all looked much the same to me. Then I began to notice endless differences, not just in the flowers but also in the shape, size, color, configuration, and texture of the root, the bulb, the stem, and the leaves. Plants, I learned, are as distinct from one another as rabbits are from butterflies.

The surface of a plant, upon inspection, is not smooth,

but woolly, downy, cottony, silky, or bristly. Its hairs or bristles vary from simple to branched to tufted to hooked. Likewise, leaves come in dozens of shapes from umbrella-shaped to heart-shaped to hand-shaped. Leaf edges vary from smooth to indented to scalloped. They can be simple or compound. A simple leaf has one mid-rib with branches, while a compound leaf has a leaf-rib that supports more than one small leaf, or leaflet. Leaves also vary in the direction they face: erect, curved back or up, drooping, twisted, or nodding.

The weather was perfect for plant hunting. In South America, the seasons are reversed from ours in Europe. In May the weather cools here, as it does in November in France. By the time my master stood up and wiped off his hands, my stomach was growling. The sun was dipping into mid-afternoon. Like my master, I'd hardly noticed the passage of time.

Monsieur Commerson took a leather bag off his shoulder and unpacked his lunch. He handed me two biscuits, a slab of cheese, and a piece of beef—all fresh. "Compliments of Captain Giraudais," he explained. "Our fare should continue to improve now that we've finally landed."

"Thank you, sir," I said.

My master crossed his legs. The bottom of his pants lifted, and I saw his wound. It was a raw, oozy sore, the size and shape of a large clam. A sympathy pain raced up my back. I tried to concentrate on my lunch and not to peek at my master's wound, but I couldn't help myself. He caught me staring.

"It looks much nastier than it is," he said. "It's an old injury that flares up in the rain."

"How did it happen, sir?" I asked.

"A year ago, my dog was attacked by a swarm of bees. He was so crazed with pain that he didn't know who I was, and he chewed my leg."

"It looks very painful, sir," I said.

"As I said, it looks worse than it is," he repeated. "And there's nothing Vivez can do for me that I haven't already done, so don't dare tell me to go see him."

He looked at me and scowled for emphasis, before smiling. "Besides, I have no faith in ships' surgeons. They're all drunks and butchers."

My master's joke made me laugh. I knew that he was a physician with university training. And physicians look down on surgeons, who have much less scientific preparation. I had to admit that Monsieur Commerson spoke the truth: When it came to French medicine, the cure was often worse than the illness. Yet his wound alarmed me: An open sore sometimes brings on a fever, which often leads to death. I'd seen it happen more than once in my own village.

After we finished eating, my master found a new spot for digging. He pulled a vial from his bag. "Fill this with water," he said. "And watch out for snakes. Many species are poisonous here."

I headed for the Cuelo River, congratulating myself for bringing a knife. I might need it to fend off poisonous snakes. Birds chattered in the brush. A cool breeze wafted through the grass. I still felt unsteady on my land legs, but I ignored my shakiness.

Before I reached the riverbank, I heard Giant shrieking. I guessed, wrongly, that a poisonous snake had bit him while he was fishing. I raced for our landing, half hoping it was true.

I was amazed to see an Indian with a hatchet hold-

ing Giant by the hair. Giant was struggling to break free, but his head was pulled back tight. He had to work hard to keep the Indian from slicing his neck with the hatchet. It looked like a losing battle.

Without thinking, I pulled the knife from my pocket and ran screaming toward Giant. The Indian was so surprised that he let go of Giant's hair, and in a moment Giant was sitting upright. The Indian crouched, looking back and forth from Giant to me. I held my knife in the air, ready to strike, as Giant was getting to his feet.

The Indian must have realized that Giant was bigger than him – and there were two of us. He mumbled words in a strange language, stepped toward his horse, and mounted, pulling his cloak tight over his shoulders. With the fluid motion of a cavalry man, he disappeared in a tangle of brush.

Giant seemed shaken, and he shot me an odd look, though he didn't say a word. I guess he was embarrassed – or angry – that I'd caught him in such straits. I filled the vial and returned to my master.

Monsieur Commerson was still engrossed in his work. For some reason, I didn't tell him about the Indian. Maybe I was too shaken up to talk about it. Or maybe I didn't want to alarm my master. Or maybe I wasn't sure he'd even believe me. I could hardly believe it myself.

A few hours later, Giant and I canoed back to the *Étoile* in the setting sun. He never mentioned his brush with death, but he didn't order me around, either. The wind whistled through the trees. A panther howled from the riverbank.

I couldn't wait to tell Jacques everything. He didn't even know that I'd gone ashore today. He'd be amused to

hear that I'd rescued Giant from an Indian. I wondered how Jacques had fared in Buenos Aires. What stories could he tell? I bet that my adventure would outdo Jacques' most heart-stopping tale.

CHAPTER 13.

May 19, 1767
South America,
Buenos Aires' Harbor
15 weeks at sea

The next morning, I reported for mess duty before dawn. I was only half-awake when Henri sided up to me and popped a question: "Do you know where Jacques went?"

"What do you mean?" I asked.

Henri looked at me as if he wasn't buying my answer. "You know," he said.

"I don't even know what you're talking about," I said, pouring myself a cup of coffee.

Henri smiled as if he was in on an amusing secret. "Jacques didn't come back from shore yesterday," he said.

"Jacques didn't come back?"

"As if you didn't know," he said with a skeptical look. "I bet you were in on it."

I shook my head, still trying to take in this news.

Henri laughed. "Quit acting."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Everybody's saying Jacques jumped ship to go back to France and be with his girl."

"I don't believe it," I said, even though I knew how worried Jacques had been about Monique. I felt protective of my best friend, and I didn't want to say anything that might be used against him—or against me, for that matter. It was a basic ship rule: You had to inform on deserters. If you knew anything and held back, you could be in serious trouble, too.

"So, Jacques didn't tell you he was leaving?" Henri asked, looking me in the eye.

I shook my head. "No."

"So how do you explain his disappearance?"

"I don't know what happened, but I don't believe he jumped ship."

Henri raised his eyebrows. "Umm-huh."

"Maybe he got sick."

"Or maybe he got lost," Henri said grinning.

I turned my back on Henri and joined Gérard, who was mixing flour and milk for fresh sea biscuits. I didn't say anything more about Jacques, but I was alarmed. I understood the enormity of his present situation. Deserting a ship was a grave offense. If our officers found him, they'd cut his rations. He'd probably lose his wages for the whole trip. He might even get a ducking, a terrible punishment. They'd hang him by his feet from a rope, pull him up above the water, let him drop, and then repeat it, again and again.

I thought about Rat, who'd been in the longboat with Jacques, and about his threatening glare as they left for Buenos Aires. My friend was bigger, but Rat was sneaky and mean. Countless times Rat had knocked me from behind, tripped me in the dark, or thrown trash at me. Maybe he'd done Jacques some mischief.

Of course, the most likely explanation was Hen-

ri's. Desertions were common. Though I hated to admit it, Jacques had probably jumped ship and joined a vessel bound for Europe. He might already be *en route* to Monique.

His disappearance surprised me as much as anybody. No, it surprised me more. Jacques was my best friend, and he'd never hinted that he might desert. Maybe Jacques had been afraid to breathe a word about it. Or maybe he didn't want to put me in the position of knowing about his illegal plans. Then again, he might have left on a whim.

When we finished cleaning the pots and pans, I returned to our cabin. My master was just climbing from his cot. He went directly to his desk. I heard him muttering to himself: "I don't know where to begin." My master still had dozens of plants to sketch from our first day in the field.

"I could help you with your sketching, sir," I blurted.

He cast me a doubtful look.

"I used to do a fair amount of drawing at my father's pottery shop. I love to draw."

"Then draw you shall," he said. "And no harm if it can't be used." My master's comment made me feel slighted. I had never let him down, so he had no reason not to trust me with this project.

Monsieur Commerson rummaged through a desk drawer for paper, pen, and ink and pulled a fresh plant from a vial. He tossed the paper and pencils on my cot but held onto the plant. I could see that a lecture was coming. "Look at each flower as if you were a man in love," he said. "Then you will discover beauty in any plant." I didn't say a word, but I was thinking that my master was a near-maniac when it came to plants.

The Botanist carefully laid down the prize and returned

to his desk. I threw Bandit off my cot and set to work. I'd been reading my master's books on plants and paying close attention to his lectures. So, I knew how to copy each part exactly: root, stem, bulb, branches, leaves, stalk, and flower.

From his desk, Monsieur Commerson turned and added a last bit of advice: "Just reproduce what you see. Try nothing fancy."

As I turned to my assignment, a wayward worry about Jacques crossed my mind. I pushed it away and concentrated on the plant.

This is what I observed: Its surface was covered in simple down. The plant's root was palmate, or hand-shaped, and its triangular leaves were rolled outward. As for the flower, it was "perfect." A perfect flower has five parts: flower cup, blossom, stamens, pistils, and receptacle. The flower cup protects a growing plant. This flower had a green upright support. Its blossoms were purple and funnel-shaped. Inside the blossom sit the flower's reproductive organs, the stamens and pistils. A blossom's petals protect these organs, and its receptacle supports them. This flower had five stamens and one pistil.

When I was satisfied with my observations, I began to draw. Soon I was lost in this effort. I don't know how much time passed before my master jarred me from my trance. "What other talents are you hiding from me?" he asked. My master gave me a suspicious look and grinned. "Your work is excellent," he said, taking the paper, pen, ink, and plant from my cot. "It's a relief to know that I can count on your help with this task."

Bandit hopped onto my cot. I leaned back to pet our cat and savor my master's praise. No one had ever paid me such an important compliment: The Royal Botanist

appreciated *my* work. I'd won him over, despite his initial misgivings. I only hoped that my master's trust would continue to grow, along with my responsibilities.

A minute later, Monsieur Commerson was rushing me out the door. "We're going to town," he said. "The longboat will be leaving soon."

The officers let us off at a pier, about a half-mile walk along a mucky street to Buenos Aires. My master's limping had gotten worse. He was still wearing the new shoes that he'd put on for the first time yesterday. Though he never complained, I could see that every step caused him pain.

The main town square of Buenos Aires overlooked the Rio de la Plata. The town's most important buildings stood on the four sides of the square: the governor's palace, the town hall, a cathedral and a palace. In the entire town, only those four buildings reached more than a story high. Wood was so scarce on the endless grasslands.

In the center of the square was a small, noisy marketplace. People bartered, argued, sang, and shouted. There were some dark-skinned Mestizos, people of Indian and Spanish blood, with bright scarves and colorful shirts; many cocoa-skinned Spaniards; and light-skinned Europeans.

Some Spanish women with long black braids passed into the marketplace. I stopped and stared along with every man in the vicinity. My throat tightened and my stomach sank. I felt as if I'd just swallowed a big rock. Seeing these women made me miss being a girl. Men used to look at me that way, unable to take their eyes off my hair. Even gentlemen far above my station, men like Monsieur Commerson, couldn't resist staring at my long, blonde mane.

My master caught me looking at the women, and he grinned. He'd been gazing at them, too. "Lovely, aren't they?"

I couldn't say a word. My throat was so tight I could hardly open my mouth. I just nodded.

We made our way through stands full of exotic fruits, fresh meat, fish, and leather goods of every kind. My master stopped at a stall to try on soft moccasins. Soon, he found a pair that fit. "I hope these help my feet," he said.

Our noses led us from the leather stand to a charcoal pit, where a Spaniard was grilling beef. My master paid for a half-dozen steaks wrapped in thin bread. We made our way back to the wide stairs at the foot of the cathedral. My mouth watered as I sat down to eat. Jacques was right about the effect of fresh food on famished senses.

My work had taken my mind off Jacques. Now my apprehensions flooded over me. Jacques might still be in Buenos Aires, in this very marketplace, where the captain might find him. Then again, he might be on his way back to France.

Screams interrupted my thoughts. For a second, I feared that something had just happened to Jacques. Then I saw a carriage stuck in the mud on the road below us. A man was beating his slave with a horsewhip. The poor soul couldn't get the carriage wheels out of the muck. The whipping continued, and the screams grew louder.

I had never seen anything like this in France. To be sure, fathers sometimes beat their children and their wives, and landowners hit their tenants, but not on the town square in the middle of the day. Over the past four months, the officers of the *Étoile* had never whipped a man on our unruly crew.

I wrapped my steak in the thin bread and stuffed it in my pocket. My master put away his lunch, too. "No man should be a slave," he said. "Slavery demeans us all." He

shook his head in disgust. "Sometimes I forget that the world has not yet embraced the principles of our French philosophers."

He gasped in frustration. "In any case, it's nearly time to return to the longboat," he said. "But first I must send my correspondence on its way." He patted the leather pouch that held his mail.

I felt for my letters to my aunt and cousin. What would Jackie and Lisette think if they could see me here, in Buenos Aires? Someday I'd tell them everything. Thinking of my family triggered a pang of homesickness.

"Come along, Jean," my master said, tugging me back to my new life.

We headed back to the wharf, where an officer directed my master to a Dutch ship about to return to the continent. Their captain agreed to take our letters. He promised to pass them on to a French vessel at the first opportunity.

We rejoined the *Étoile* before sunset. As I climbed onto the deck, Midshipman Donat approached me. "I need to speak with you," he said in a somber voice. He had never spoken to me this way before. Had I done something wrong?

I followed Donat below-deck to a small cabin at the edge of the berthing floor. The midshipman had never before brought me to his cabin. A wave of nausea passed over me, as a terrifying question raced through my head: Had somebody learned my secret?

When we stepped inside, he took a packet from his coat and unwrapped it. "Do you recognize this?" he asked, handing me a silver band.

I turned it over and saw the inscription: *J.J. and M.L., always*. "It belongs to Jacques Jacain."

Donat sighed and shook his head. "I thought so," he said. "They found his body up the river with knife wounds in his back and chest."

Donat's words were like a hard, low punch to my belly that nearly knocked me over. I looked at him in disbelief.

"A Spanish official brought us the band. He figured the man had come from our ship."

I nodded, unable to speak.

Donat continued talking in a matter-of-fact voice, but his expression was pained. "Captain Giraudais will send an officer to get the body tomorrow," he said. "We'll dispose of it at sea."

A chill ran up my spine. I couldn't cry or swallow, but tears welled up in my eyes. It felt like a ball of burlap was caught in my throat. I held out the silver band.

Midshipman Donat took it and pushed it back in his pocket. "That'll be all, Baret," he said, turning away.

The berthing deck was quiet when I passed through again. News spreads quickly on a ship. I sensed that everyone knew what I'd just learned. At the companionway, somebody came up behind me and grunted my name. It was Giant, one of the last people I wished to see. His voice was kind. "I just want to say, I'm sorry," he said. "It's hard to lose a mate."

CHAPTER 14.

June 15, 1767

En route to Rio de Janeiro

19 weeks at sea

The *Étoile* sailed from Buenos Aires with the mystery of Jacques' murder still unsolved. We were headed for *Rio de Janeiro* where our sister ship awaited us.

They disposed of Jacques' body as soon as we left the Rio de la Plata. Midshipman Donat ordered some deckhands to fetch the corpse. Though wrapped in a sail, the decaying flesh smelled putrid after a month in the bilge. The seamen hoisted it onto the bulwarks and pushed it overboard. I watched his body sink into the cold, inky water, and my heart sank with it. Donat mumbled a few words and a quick prayer for Jacques' soul. Then everybody returned to work.

I took the rock that I'd picked up at Rochefort port from my pocket and tossed it where the body went down. A bit of French soil that Jacques had loved so well.

His perfunctory burial added to my sadness, anger, and fear. They'd dumped my best friend overboard like garbage. I hadn't felt so lonely since my father's death. I was thousands of miles from my aunt and cousin, the only people in the world who still cared about me. I missed them.

And I missed being myself.

Now I had nobody to talk to or to watch my back and defend me from Rat, who was on a campaign to make me suffer. When he wasn't hurling something nasty my way, he was trying to trip me or hit me or shove me. He'd even invaded my dreams.

I couldn't stop thinking about Monique, either. That poor girl didn't even know that she'd lost the love of her life. The news might take months to reach her. Meanwhile, she went on believing in Jacques' return. I only hoped she had a good family to help her. Then again, my father never did get over his grief, despite my best efforts.

That afternoon, I sketched some plants for my master and painted them. When I finished, I took out a book on botany and went on deck. I wanted to keep my mind off Jacques, but it was hard to concentrate. I sat atop a barrel, reading the same sentence over and over. Somebody marched up beside me and cleared his throat. I didn't want to talk, and I pretended not to hear, but he tapped me on the shoulder. I looked up and saw Giant staring at my book. "You read?" he asked.

"My father taught me," I answered, recovering my voice.

"I can't read a word," he said.

"I could teach you," I blurted, before I thought better of it. I'd never taught anybody anything before.

He smiled, and his big mouth opened like a cave. "No. Everybody says I'm stupid."

Inexplicably, I felt sorry for Giant. "It's not that hard," I said. "I learned to read when I was a boy."

"But you're smart," he said. "I see you working with the Botanist." Then he turned and shuffled off.

When I returned to my book, something hard hit me on the cheek. I ignored it, but it happened again. This time a bone fell to the deck in front of me. I leaned over to pick it up and saw Rat slipping behind a mast. Giant was nowhere in sight. Until now, I'd assumed that Giant was in on Rat's campaign against me, but maybe I was wrong.

I thought about returning to the cabin, but I didn't want to give Rat any satisfaction from getting me to leave the deck. He kept peeking out from behind the mast and chucking bones at me. Finally, I picked one up, hurled it back, and hit him on the nose. I have a great arm from throwing acorns at squirrels with the boys from my town. After I whacked him a few times, he slunk away, rat that he was. I felt much better.

The next evening, the *Étoile* sailed into Guanabara Bay. A huge granite mountain jutted over the left side of the bay. Lush islands studded its turquoise waters. Flocks of herons, ducks, and geese glided along the shore and around the islands. Giant ships anchored close by, while little faluas, the native sailboats, flitted past. No wonder sailors say that Rio de Janeiro has the most beautiful harbor in the world.

From the quarterdeck, I gazed across the bay. The horizon was glowing pink, purple, and copper in the setting sun. Green waves splashed the *Étoile*. Flowers perfumed the air. Our crewmen brought out fiddles and flutes. For once, they played sweet melodies, rather than their usual rowdy tunes.

The music made me think of Jacques. Sadness flooded over me. His death kept coming back on me, ruining every pleasant moment.

"Look," my master shouted.

"Where?" asked Monsieur Véron.

He pointed to a longboat in the distance. It glided between a double-masted brig with square sails and a goëlette with peaked sails.

I squinted, trying to follow the longboat in the glare of the sunset, relieved to be distracted from my gloomy thoughts.

"It's the chevalier—Captain Louis Antoine de Bougainville," my master said.

"How can you tell?" Véron asked in amazement. The longboat was still far away.

"I'd recognize De Bougainville in a crowd from a quarter-league," my master answered.

Soon I understood what my master meant. When the longboat reached the *Étoile*, four Frenchmen boarded our ship. Captain De Bougainville towered over everybody. He had a strong jaw, aquiline nose, and large brown eyes with curling lashes. His shoulders were broad, his waist trim, and his legs long. He was the most handsome man I'd ever seen. Captain Giraudais escorted the commander to the officer's salon.

As soon as they emerged again, my master hurried over. "It's a pleasure to see you," Monsieur Commerson said, bowing.

"Our *botano-maniac* extraordinaire," De Bougainville said, laughing and shaking my master's hand. Everybody seemed to know about my master's passion for plants, which made me proud to be Assistant Botanist.

"Captain Giraudais tells me that you have been very, very, very busy, Monsieur Commerson," De Bougainville said, raising his eyebrows.

"Sir, I assure you that both my merits and my faults have been exaggerated," my master said.

"So tell me, Philibert," De Bougainville said. "How long has it been since we dined in Paris? Two years? Three?"

"Three years exactly," my master said.

"Well, we shall dine again this week," De Bougainville said. "The Viceroy of Brazil has extended an invitation to my entire staff for Thursday dinner."

"I look forward to it," my master said.

"Keep in mind how delicate our situation is here, in Portuguese territory."

"I know that Portugal hates Spain, and that the King of Spain is our ally," my master said.

"Yes, and Portugal is about to wage war on Spain—again." De Bougainville said, shaking his head and gasping. "If they do, the Viceroy may feel free to confiscate the *Étoile* and *Boudeuse* and make us all prisoners."

"What perfect timing," my master said.

De Bougainville nodded. "Tomorrow, I will negotiate the details of our stay here in Rio de Janeiro. Meanwhile, everyone must be patient.

"Which brings me to another point, Commerson: For the time being, I am putting you *under arrest*," De Bougainville said in a mock-serious voice.

"Under arrest?"

"Yes, Giraudais told me about the wound on your leg. I want you in your cabin with your lantern out by dark, so that it heals," Captain De Bougainville ordered. "We have a long way to go, and I plan to rely on your help. It goes without saying that King Louis is also counting on you. The plants that you find during this voyage could be the start of a new chapter in our kingdom's economy. You must take care of the Royal Botanist. Rest, and let that wound heal. That's an order."

"As you please, sir," my master said, smiling. De Bougainville's order held a compliment: The captain and even the king were counting on my master.

Myself, I was pleased that Monsieur Commerson would now be forced to attend to that sore, which I feared could kill him. Everyone, it seemed, had noticed his limping.

Captain Giraudais slipped through the officers on the quarterdeck and stood beside Captain De Bougainville. "Please, sir, a few words to the crew of the *Étoile*."

Giraudais led De Bougainville toward the railing above the deck, where the entire crew had collected. Every man stood at attention and saluted. Captain de Bougainville gazed across the sea of faces below him and waved. The men cheered and waved back.

"Hello!" he shouted.

"Hello, Captain De Bougainville!" the men shouted back.

"At last, we are together—the *Étoile* and *Boudeuse*—all of us brothers aboard sister ships. For a half year, I have dreamed of this moment with profound hope. You men have been in my thoughts and prayers during these long months of separation.

"Every voyage across the great Atlantic holds danger. You have faced more than your share of hardship, I know. Through it all, your captain assures me, you have borne misfortune with courage, fortitude, and patience. For this I applaud you."

De Bougainville grinned and began to clap, his officers joining in. The crew of the *Étoile* cheered, whistled, and clapped with him, mesmerized by the captain's charisma.

"I shall repay you momentarily. But first let us all toast King Louis XV and the great Kingdom of France."

"Long live the King of France!" somebody shouted, and the men joined in: "Long live King Louis XV! Long live the kingdom of France!"

Suddenly, we heard noises coming from the side of the *Étoile*. Everybody crowded the bulwarks. Frenchmen began arriving in long boats, canoes and rowboats. The men from our sister ship were bringing us a feast. Our crewmen let down nets and pulled up loads of fruits, vegetables, bread, meat, and jugs of wine.

I waited on the quarterdeck near my master, hoping to see more of Captain De Bougainville. Soon the officers were seated around a tray that held meats and cheeses, dates and nuts, chunks of coconut, sugar cane, palm, bananas, mangos, and guavas. "I believe that I've died and gone to heaven," Monsieur Commerson said. To my pleasant surprise, he handed me a plateful.

"You think you're in heaven now," said an officer from the *Boudeuse*. "Just wait until you try this." He poured clear yellow liquid into small cups and passed them around.

"The people of Brazil call this drink *cachaça*," the officer said. "It's made from sugar cane. But don't be fooled by its sweet taste or by its nicknames. They call it 'Grandmother' and 'Little Blond,' because the people love *cachaça* so dearly." My master and Véron chuckled.

The officer shook his finger at them. "My advice to you is this: Enjoy the Little Blond, but not too much. She's powerful. If you're not careful, your words will come true: She will send you to heaven before your time."

The scientists were still laughing when our dazzling captain joined them.

"Many thanks for this miraculous feast," my master said.

"The pleasure is all mine," Captain De Bougainville replied. "But I should warn you about that drink."

"Your officer has already warned us," my master said.

De Bougainville glanced at the young man whose bright smile suggested a pleasant temperament. "So you've met Denys, my first lieutenant," he said, smiling. The lieutenant saluted his captain.

"Did Denys advise you to spit out a first mouthful of *cachaça*?"

"Why so?"

"As an offering to whichever saint you wish to thank for giving us *cachaça*."

"And I assumed that you favor Science over Superstition, sir," my master said.

"I fancy myself a man of Science," De Bougainville said. "Yet I have learned never to turn my back on the beliefs of others. They may see truths that are invisible to us. I choose to be safe, rather than regretful. Besides, we are setting out on a dangerous journey. I for one welcome the help of every saint or spirit who may be willing to assist us."

For once, Monsieur Commerson didn't argue the virtues of Science and Reason. He lifted his cup to Captain de Bougainville. "I make my offering to Saint Francis, the kindest, gentlest of all saints." With that, he took a swig of his drink and spit it back onto the deck of the *Étoile*.

The other officers on the quarterdeck followed the Botanist's example. Then they toasted King Louis and far-away France, and we all drank cups of *cachaça*, savoring its fiery syrup and anticipating the sweet charms of Rio de Janeiro.

CHAPTER 15.

June 20, 1767

Rio de Janeiro

20 weeks at sea

A few days later, Giant caught up with me after mess duty. He got right to the point. "You said I could learn to read. I been thinking I'd like to try."

I thought of Jacques. He'd have had a great laugh over my current predicament. The thought of it made me smile, the first time I'd smiled over Jacques since his death. Giant took my smile as a sign that I was ready, willing, and able to help him. "The sail makers' workshop is empty. We could go there."

Now I was stuck.

I hurried to the cabin and crammed paper, pen, ink, and a book into my bag. Giant was waiting for me outside officer's quarters. Carrying a tiny lantern, he led me around the companionway into the sail-makers' workshop.

The room was crowded with benches, boxes of needles and hooks, rolls of cotton, thread, twine, spikes, pricklers, fids, mallets, and rope. Sunlight filtered in from the companionway.

I hadn't given a moment's thought to teaching Giant how to read. In fact, I never expected he'd ask me. We sat down on a bench. I took out my book and opened it

to a treatise by Jean Jacques Rousseau. The philosopher's love of nature had endeared him to my master. As a result, I had been trying hard to read this book. Though it was dense and difficult, my master assured me that reading it would be good for my heart and my mind. So I'd kept at it.

"Let's start here," I told Giant. "Follow along with me."

I began reading slowly, pointing at each word, so Giant could follow along: *"Man is born free; and everywhere he is in chains. One thinks himself the master of others, and still remains a greater slave than they. How did this change come about? I do not know. What can make it legitimate? That question I think I can answer."*

I looked at Giant. "Okay, now you try it," I said.

Giant didn't say a word, though he looked miserable. He had listened politely, but I could see that he was lost. I closed the book.

"Maybe we should start with something easier," I said. He nodded.

"Do you know how to write your name?" I asked.

He shook his head, no, which made me feel foolish—and contrite. I'd asked Giant to read a difficult book, and he couldn't even write his name. For that matter, I didn't know his name. "So what is your name?" I asked.

"Martin," he answered.

I took out my drawing paper, dipped my pen in ink, and wrote *M-a-r-t-i-n*. "And what's your family name?" I asked him.

He hesitated and blushed.

"You do have a family name, don't you?" I asked.

Martin nodded. "Petit," he said.

"Petit?" I repeated. I was so surprised that I laughed.

Martin broke into a huge grin. "It doesn't fit me, does

it?" Then he burst out laughing, too. Finally, he said: "Don't tell any of our mates."

"Don't worry," I said. "It'll be our *little* secret." We laughed again, which was a great relief. I'd been all gloom since Jacques' murder.

I wrote Martin's full name on my paper and showed it to him. "Can you write it now?" I asked.

He looked dejected. "I don't know my letters," he said.

"Then we'd better get to work," I replied.

After our reading lesson, I returned to the cabin to help my master. His herbaria were overflowing with hundreds of plants that needed recording, cataloguing, drawing, and pressing. My master now counted on my help with this huge task.

I was deep into my drawing, when Monsieur Véron knocked and entered our cabin, looking sleepy. Since our arrival in South America, the Astronomer had kept busy most nights studying the southern stars. When we left Rio de Janeiro, he would be taking on a more important task: tracking our longitude – the distance ~~north or south of the~~ ^{east or west of the} ~~equator~~ ^{Paz}. Because of the uncertainties of longitude, even the greatest captains sometimes became lost at sea, and countless seamen had lost their lives. The survival of the *Étoile* and *Boudeuse* might depend upon Véron's success.

Much to my surprise, the scientists soon directed their attention to me.

"You've turned your assistant into a botanist, I see," Monsieur Véron said.

"A first-rate botanist," my master bragged, "who draws as well as I do."

"And now you both move about like sleep walkers," Véron said.

"I'll catch up on my sleep when I'm dead," my master said. "For now, I'm going to collect as many plants as I can. I won't have this chance again."

I could hardly believe my ears: My master was boasting about me. Me! It took a while to get back to work. And then Lieutenant Caro passed by our cabin and poked in his head. "Don't forget dinner tonight at the Viceroy's palace," he said. "Your company is expected, Commerson, and yours, too, Véron."

"I hadn't forgotten," my master replied.

Monsieur Commerson turned to me. "Take out a clean shirt and pants for me, Baret. And put on a fresh shirt yourself."

That was how I learned that I would be accompanying my master to the Viceroy's palace, another pleasant surprise.

At the same time, my master's curt order reminded me not to forget my place: I was just a servant. Even so, his praise kept rolling over me like a gentle tide.

That evening a longboat took us to a wharf on Guanabara Bay. Visitors from many lands crowded the area. We walked to a nearby plaza, where vendors sang and clapped to attract the attention of shoppers. The smell of frying dough and barbecue filled the air. Fruits and nuts, breads and chocolates, coffee and tobacco, flowers and vegetables, dried fish and dried fruits, clothes and shoes, utensils and pottery packed the stalls. Birds and monkeys chattered from cages. It was a carnival of life such as I'd never seen.

Before long, we spotted Captain de Bougainville. Strangers stopped to gawk at our captain who loomed over the crowd. At six feet, he was a head taller than most Frenchmen. When my master waved, De Bougainville took

off his hat and bowed. It made me proud that a great man like Captain De Bougainville treated my master with such respect.

The Botanist carried a plant with vivid red, star-shaped flowers. We'd found this species throughout the countryside and in some gardens of Rio de Janeiro. The vine-like shrubs climbed up trees, hung over arches, ran along walls. Their flowers—magenta, red, mauve, or purple—gave off a rich perfume.

My master handed the plant to De Bougainville. "I've named it *Bougainvillea*," he said. "I hope this plant will help to spread your fame. Everyone who visits these shores will think of you and remember our expedition when they see these flowers."

The honor of naming a plant always goes to the first person to discover and classify it. Consequently, my master would have many opportunities to name plants after colleagues, patrons, family, and friends. I knew of his plans to name a plant after Monsieur Véron, Captain Giraudais, and other members of the expedition. My master's choice of this vibrant flower was a fitting tribute to our handsome captain.

"I'm honored, Philibert," De Bougainville said. He smiled, bent over a blossom, and inhaled. "I only hope that our accomplishments are as memorable as this striking plant."

Denys, De Bougainville's first lieutenant, was standing by his side, staring at the *Bougainvillea* with rapt attention. I remembered the first mate from our landing in Rio de Janeiro, when he came to the *Étoile* with food and drink. While the captain spoke with my master, Denys came up beside me. "You're the botanist's assistant, aren't you?" he asked.

"Yes, sir, I'm Jean Baret," I said, surprised at the first lieutenant's acknowledgment.

"Good to meet you, Baret," he said. "I'm First Lieutenant Denys. You know, if I didn't have my job, I'd like to have yours, working for a famous botanist. As it happens, I'm an amateur botanist, myself. I keep a small herbarium. Whenever I get a chance, I do a bit of plant hunting. That's one of the reasons I wanted to join De Bougainville. You're a lucky boy."

"Thank you, sir. I know I'm lucky to have this job, and I'm grateful to Monsieur Commerson for training me."

"You should be. Royal Botanist is the second best job after captain," he said, chuckling.

Just then, a fleet of black carriages drove into the plaza. A swarthy gentleman in a gold-trimmed, black uniform emerged from the largest carriage. "That must be the Viceroy of Brazil," Denys said, turning to me again. "I have to go, but send my regards to Lieutenant Caro. We're old friends. We came up in the navy together along with Captain Giraudais."

"Yes, sir," I said, as he stepped away, though I couldn't imagine speaking to Lieutenant Caro with such familiarity.

Suddenly, Denys stopped and turned to me again. "I look forward to reading about your discoveries when we get back to France," he said smiling.

I was speechless. I never knew that a first lieutenant could be so warm and kind. Our Lieutenant Caro still treated me like a piece of furniture that he mostly ignored. The crew of the *Boudeuse* was fortunate to have such a first mate. With De Bougainville's support and the lieutenant's charm, Denys would surely make captain one day.

A few minutes later, I followed my master, Monsieur

Véron, and three officers from the *Boudeuse* to an open carriage with black benches and thick white pads. As we rumbled along the narrow roads of Rio de Janeiro, an attendant proudly pointed out places of interest. "That's our new Carioca aqueduct," he said, indicating some huge gray arches. "The aqueducts supply our city with fresh mountain water."

We passed churches, parks, simple houses and sprawling ranches. Countless Royal palms swayed along the route. Our carriage turned onto a roadway that snaked up a hillside. Near the top, we turned onto a palm-lined drive that twisted through gardens with flowering trees. At the end of the drive, the Royal Palace spread out before us: a fairy-tale castle in stucco and tile.

Servants escorted us from our carriage to a low-walled garden overlooking an emerald canyon. Poinsettia, coral vines, hibiscus, manacá, and crotons filled the enclosure. Parrots chattered from elaborate cages. Smaller birds darted through the trees.

Butterflies of every color and size flitted from flower to flower. No wonder Brazil is called "the land of butterflies."

My master joined other guests at a long table in the center of the garden. I sat on a bench by the wall at the edge of the garden. From my spot, I could see my master and his dinner party, about ten meters away.

A battalion of servants arrived with trays full of fruits, vegetables, barbecues, seafood, and rice. A young guitarist serenaded the gathering in an earthy baritone.

I heard my master laughing. He was seated next to a small, beautiful woman. She beamed at him and waved a feathered fan that matched her turquoise gown. I could see that my master fancied her. The lady was lovely and rich, probably

educated as well. Not like me, a lowly potter's daughter. I had nothing in this world, except my meager brains and talent. A surge of jealousy rose in my throat like bile.

I reminded myself to never, ever daydream about Monsieur Commerson.

A pretty servant crossed the lawn, moving in my direction. A rainbow skirt hung to her ankles, swaying as she walked. Soon the girl arrived by my side with a tray of dates, figs, and nuts. Her skin was swarthy, but her eyes were light green. She offered me a sampling from her tray and spoke to me in perfect French. "What do you think of Rio de Janeiro?"

"I've never seen such a beautiful place," I said.

She giggled and grinned. The girl's pleasant manner put me at ease and made me uncomfortable in the same instant. It was obvious that she was flirting.

"You speak French without an accent," I said. "Are you from France?"

"No, I was born here," she said. "I've lived here all my life."

"You're lucky," I said.

"You like my land?" the girl laughed. "Maybe you move here someday."

It was wonderful to share small talk with another female, even though this female had no idea that she was chatting with another girl. Our exchange took my mind off my master and his dinner partner. I didn't look in their direction, but I kept hearing my master's enthusiastic laughter.

The last time I'd even spoken with a woman was in Rochefort, when the governess from the great house had come looking for me. That day seemed like years ago, though I had only been away from France for five months.

"Rio de Janeiro is a very exciting city," the girl said.

She ran her hand through her long black hair. Self-consciously, I ran my hand through my short hair. At night, I sometimes dreamed that my hair still fell below my waist. When I awoke, I always felt a pang of sadness.

"There are many girls and boys my age who work at the palace," she explained. "We get to meet people from every country in the world."

"Is that how you learned to speak French?" I asked.

She shook her head. "Oh, no," she said, laughing. "My grandmother grew up in a fishing village in France. She met a Portuguese sailor and ran off with him. That was my grandfather." She giggled again. "He brought my grandmother here. But my grandmother and my mother always spoke to me in French. You speak another language?"

"A few words, that's all," I said.

"Then I teach you Portuguese," she said. "Will you be here a long time?"

"I hope so," I said honestly.

"I do, too," she said. "What do they call you? They call me Albertina."

"My name is Jean."

"Good to meet you, Jean," she said, grinning.

Just then, another servant girl hurried over and nudged Albertina. "I must go," she said.

"Goodbye, Albertina," I said.

She spoke to her friend, giggled, and then looked back at me. "Goodbye for now, Jean," she said.

I watched Albertina walk away, her skirt swinging at her ankles.

And then I spent the next hour checking on my master and his dinner partner. Clearly, they enjoyed each other's

company, and I felt alone. I missed Jacques, and I wished Monsieur Commerson were talking to me. After dinner, he stood up and walked toward the back of the garden, where I was sitting. My heart raced when he reached my side. "Come along," he said tersely. "We're leaving for a concert now."

As he walked away, I couldn't stop looking at his broad, strong shoulders or his manly gait. When he reached his table, he helped the petite lady from her chair. They walked through the garden together, her tiny arm draped over his. I felt jealous and reminded myself not to be a fool.

Our carriage was waiting in the driveway. A short trip through the mountainside brought us to the theater hall. It was a low, wide building, not impressive at all from the outside. Inside, however, the hall was decorated with gilded columns, purple velvet chairs, and an immense stage with a flowing purple curtain. Below the stage, two dozen musicians prepared their horns, flutes, fiddles, and piano. A humpbacked priest in robes stood at a podium in front of the musicians.

In my village, a few people owned flutes or fiddles. Villagers often gathered to sing or dance. It was the same aboard the *Étoile*. The men chanted work songs during their shifts. After meals, they sang and danced to unwind. But I'd never been to a great music hall like this one. Nor had I seen so many instruments in one place. Only rich gentlemen and ladies in France ever enjoyed such an extravagance.

My master escorted his dinner partner to their seats at the front of the hall. I stayed with the other servants along the back wall, where I could see them from behind, chatting together.

"Hello, Jean," somebody chirped.

I turned and saw Albertina coming my way. She stopped in front of me and grinned. Servants kept pushing into the small area where I stood. Before long, I felt Albertina's warm back pressing against me. I shifted to give her room, but she continued to lean into me. I figured it was the crowd pushing her, until she giggled again like a silly shop girl.

Fortunately, the humpback priest swung his baton at that moment. The musicians began to play, the curtains opened, and a band of costumed mulattos started to sing. I couldn't understand a word, but it didn't matter: Their voices were beautiful. Their singing transported me to a heavenly place.

And Albertina's giggling brought me quickly back to earth. "Will you leave with me?" she turned and whispered.

I pretended not to hear.

"Will you go with me?" she asked again, louder this time.

"I can't," I snapped.

"Sh-h-h-h." The man standing next to me hissed.

Albertina saw his angry stare, which shut her up.

At intermission, she continued where she'd left off. "We could go for a walk and be back here before the concert ends," she whispered.

"I can't," I answered for the second time.

"Why?" she asked.

"My master would not approve," I said.

She smiled at me. "You're just shy," she said.

I didn't respond.

She looked in my eyes and quickly ran her hand

through my hair. "Your hair, it's so beautiful," she said. "You don't have to be shy with me. Come along. Please?"

I could tell that Albertina would not take a simple "no" for an answer. "I can't," I said, "because I have a fiancée in France."

Her eyes widened and her mouth pursed. "You should have told me," she whispered, "instead of leading me along all evening."

My masquerade, it seemed, was working well on land — a little too well.

Albertina glared at me. "My grandmother warned me that you Frenchmen are all swine. I should have listened." Then she turned and stomped away. Her wooden clogs banged against the tiles.

I took a deep breath before looking for my master. In a second, I located him next to the beautiful lady. They were still talking and laughing. They looked like old, intimate companions.

CHAPTER 16.

July 15, 1767
Montevideo,
Rio de la Platte
23 weeks at sea

In early July, the Bougainville expedition left Rio de Janeiro. My master seemed sad about bidding farewell to his lady friend from the dinner party. Over the past month, he had ventured alone into the city many nights to visit Mademoiselle Evangelista de Sousa.

My master's interest in the lovely heiress had made my stay in Rio de Janeiro miserable. I felt more isolated than ever. I missed Jacques, I missed France, and I missed being a woman. I also felt jealous. It was foolish, I knew. My feelings could lead nowhere. Even so, I was pleased when the *Étoile* reached the *Rio de la Platte* again and we anchored in Montevideo.

At the moment, I was walking toward town, my master and Monsieur Véron a few steps ahead. We'd been hunting plants all morning, and now we were on our way to a luncheon date with the Viceroy of Peru. Last week, Captain de Bougainville had introduced Monsieur Commerçon to the Viceroy, who was an amateur botanist. They had already become fast friends.

I carried our equipment, one box on my back and another in my arms. My master often called me his "trusty workhorse," which he meant as a compliment, but which disheartened me, in light of his latest romance. My ability to lug heavy chests had won me respect aboard ship, as well. Maybe Mademoiselle de Sousa was beautiful and rich, but the tiny lady could never carry these boxes. I drew small consolation from my superior strength.

Just then, a soldier trotted by on horseback. "Make way!" he shouted in Spanish. "Make way!"

As we hurried off the trail, a convoy of soldiers and priests passed through, their horses and donkeys kicking up dirt. Dust got into my eyes and nose. Moments later, another convoy rode by, and another thick cloud of dirt filled the air.

"What's going on?" Véron said, taking out a handkerchief and blowing his nose.

"I have no idea," my master said, coughing. "But we'll soon be at the Plaza Matriz. The Viceroy of Peru will enlighten us."

"Rumor has it that the Viceroy wants to steal you from De Bougainville," the Astronomer said.

"He wants me to accompany him to Lima on a plant-collecting mission. I have to admit that I'm tempted. The forests along the Amazon River are reputed to contain the world's most remarkable plants. And he's offered me a handsome salary."

I stumbled over a rock and nearly fell on my face. My master had never uttered a word about this "mission" before. I wondered whether he had written to Mademoiselle de Sousa about his plans.

"Obviously you've impressed the Viceroy of Peru with your formidable knowledge of plants," Véron said.

"I gave him an herbal that cured his miserable headache, and now he wants to keep me."

They both laughed, but I was alarmed. What would happen to me if my master left the *Étoile*? Was he secretly planning to return to Rio de Janeiro and marry his lady friend?

"I assume you've accepted his offer," Véron said.

Before my master could answer, another procession of priests and soldiers rode by. The dust and commotion overcame me. It was impossible to hear a word or to see beyond the road. It seemed like the world was crumbling.

After a long interruption, my master and Véron continued their conversation. "I've dreamed of sailing through the Strait of Magellan since I was a boy," my master said. "I wouldn't miss it now for the world."

"Nor would I," the Astronomer admitted.

I felt instant relief: My master had no plans to leave our expedition, and so I had no need to worry about my own position on the *Étoile*. Despite the dangers we might face in the Strait, I could hardly wait. I'd be the first woman ever to attempt this passage. I felt a surge of pride at the prospect.

Just past noon, we entered the Plaza Matriz in the center of Montevideo. Most days, everything stops at midday in New Grenada. People quit working to eat and relax, as they do in France. But today the plaza swarmed with soldiers and priests carrying bags, trunks, and boxes. Carts and carriages jammed the roadway. Many priests huddled together consoling each other.

"I've seen more Jesuits in the past hour than I've seen in my entire life," Véron said.

"Everything will soon be explained," my master said.

Montevideo had only two modest buildings in the Plaza Matriz: a church and a town hall, where we were headed. A servant greeted us in the large foyer. Moments later, a short, fat gentleman rushed into the hallway grinning broadly. He pumped my master's hand. "Greetings! Greetings! I am delighted to see you, Philibert, just delighted." He had a fat baby face.

"I'd like you to meet Anton Véron," my master said. "Monsieur Véron is our astronomer extraordinaire. He's trying to pin down longitude for Captain de Bougainville. Anton, this is the Viceroy of Peru."

"Ah, longitude," the Viceroy said, nodding emphatically. "The search for longitude is a noble quest, a noble quest. I wish you luck."

The Viceroy shook the Astronomer's hand. He had a mat of black hair and a bushy black mustache that curled at the ends. "I am delighted to meet you, Monsieur Véron," he said. "It's marvelous to have visitors from the Kingdom of France here in Montevideo. Marvelous! My favorite city in the world is Paris. I adore your food! Your art! Your sculpture! Your architecture! There is no place like it. No place in the world."

The Viceroy continued, pointing dramatically toward the doorway. "I must share with you my dream. I plan to model this town after Paris. Yes, Montevideo! It seems impossible, I know. I know. But someday, someday we will be known as the Paris of South America."

"On this new continent, anything is possible," my master said.

The Viceroy grinned and pumped my master's hand again. "Ah, Monsieur, you flatter me. But never mind. Never mind. I thank you. Now, come along, gentlemen, come along. We have many things to discuss."

He ushered us up a stairway and into a large, spare room. A carafe of wine, a vase of flowers, and three silver goblets sat on a small table. The Viceroy poured wine into the goblets and lifted one. "To the Kingdom of Spain and her trusted ally, the Kingdom of France," he said.

"To Spain and France," my master echoed.

My master and Véron slipped into leather chairs. "Do tell," my master said. "What is going on in Montevideo? I've never seen so many priests in one place, outside of Rome."

"I can hardly believe it myself," the Viceroy said, shaking his head. He paused for a moment to allow the drama to build.

My master and Véron leaned forward.

"King Charles has banished the Jesuits from Spanish territory," the Viceroy whispered.

My master and Véron shared a shocked expression and fell silent. The Viceroy grinned and nodded. "Yes, it's all been carried out quickly and quietly – quickly and quietly. For that reason, the Governor of Montevideo will not be able to join us today. He is directing our soldiers, as we speak – as we speak."

"There must be twenty Catholic missions in the Rio de la Plata alone," my master said.

"Twice that number," the Viceroy corrected.

"And your king has seized them all?" Véron asked.

The Viceroy nodded again. "Every one," he said, "every one."

"And he fears no repercussions?" Véron asked.

"He foresees great peril if he fails to take action," the Viceroy said. "The Jesuits have wielded tremendous power here, yes, tremendous power. At least one hundred thousand Indians work on Jesuit missions. The king cannot tolerate such a kingdom within his domain. Can you blame him?"

"Extraordinary," Monsieur Commerson replied. "And I assume that the settlers here support King Charles?"

"Absolutely," the Viceroy said. "They support him absolutely. They have pressed him for these changes, pressed him for years."

"Umm, of course," Monsieur Véron said. "No doubt the settlers will take over the Jesuit lands"

"That is true," the Viceroy said. "The settlers maintain that the Jesuits overprotect the Indians. Our Spanish landlords will make them work."

"No doubt they will," Véron said.

The Viceroy grinned and nodded enthusiastically, but Monsieur Véron knit his brow. The Jesuits had protected the Indians for hundreds of years. Priests had followed the first explorers to South America, hoping to win new converts. They had established missions throughout the land. How would the Spanish settlers treat the Indians without the Jesuits to defend them?

A matronly servant arrived with bowls of spicy soup and cheese. My master and Véron drank soup and sipped wine in silence. A few minutes later, the stout servant returned with platters of meat, fruit, and fresh bread. Everyone quietly digested the food and the news.

After the old woman set down the platters, she motioned me to follow her into the hallway and handed me a plate. "*Gracias*," I whispered.

"*De nada*," she said, pinching my cheek.

I sat down on a small chair by the doorway. The diners had moved on to a new topic. "Did you hear about the *San Miguel*?" the Viceroy asked.

For the past week, troubling rumors had been circulating among our crew about a Spanish vessel called *San Miguel*.

"They say half the crew died," my master said.

"Worse than that, much worse," the Viceroy said, shaking his head.

My master and Véron stopped eating and exchanged glances. "What have you heard?" my master asked.

"Ah, the poor *San Miguel*," the Viceroy sighed. "She was en route to Peru, yes, en route to Peru. Their captain should have waited for our spring before leaving for the Strait. Winter in the Strait always brings snow and sleet, and terrible wind – always, always. They should have turned back sooner. They were stuck in the Strait for weeks, yes, for weeks. And then scurvy set in. By the time they returned to our *Rio de la Platte*, most of the crew had expired. The few survivors I have met are thin as ghosts. Yes, thin as ghosts."

The Viceroy shrugged, shook his head, and sighed. Then he held a tray toward his guests. "Eat, eat, eat."

"Thank you, the supper was delicious," my master said. "But I am full."

"I too am full," Véron said. "Thank you. It was wonderful."

"Ah, I have alarmed you both," the Viceroy said. He clapped his hands, and the servant scurried over to remove the dishes. A moment later, she arrived with a tray of small gourds that held silver straws..

"Try this. Try this," the Viceroy said passing a gourd to my master. "It's maté, yerba maté. You will love it. In Montevideo, everybody drinks maté. Everybody. Drink through the *bombilla*, the silver straw."

The three men drank in silence, sipping through the straws.

"My ghostly tale disturbed you," the Viceroy said. "Now I must make it up to you. I have been promising to give you a royal tour, Philibert. I have some lovely, lovely spots to show you at my estancia. You can botanize there to your heart's content." He smiled pleasantly.

"How can we refuse such a gracious offer?" my master asked.

That evening, we returned to the *Étoile* to pack our bags. No sooner had I arrived on deck than Martin waylaid me. I'd promised him another reading lesson after supper. "Nobody's in the sail maker's workshop," he told me.

"All right," I said, though I was feeling tired and chilled. "I have to go back to the cabin first. I'll meet you."

By the time I reached the workshop, Martin had set up the oil lantern and two stools. As soon as I sat down, he began reading through a deck of cards that I'd made him. "Come, run, plant, is, am, stem, you, he, root, she, they, flower . . ."

I'd been tutoring Martin for several weeks, showing him how to write his name and teaching him the letters and sounds of the alphabet. He'd learned to blend letters into simple words. Now, he was getting the idea of syllables, too.

When Martin finished the cards, I gave him a hand-made booklet about the history of our kingdom. My master's books contained difficult vocabulary, so I rewrote the

ideas in simple words. Martin turned over the booklet, like he was holding a precious relic.

He read it slowly, picking up speed and confidence. When I stopped him after several pages, perspiration was dripping from his brow. Martin looked like he'd been swabbing the *Étoile* all afternoon, but he was grinning. "I never thought I'd read in my life. At the orphanage they said I was stupid."

"You were an orphan?"

"Born that way."

"That's sad," I said.

Martin shook his head. "No, they treated me fine. I never starved."

"But they didn't teach you anything."

"I didn't say that. They thought it was better to teach me a trade I could use. They let me apprentice with their carpenter. Then I got a chance to go on a ship. I love the sea. And now I'm learning to read – thanks to you, Professor Jean."

We both laughed at this new nickname. I had to admit that I felt comfortable with Martin. I decided to bring up a subject that was often on my mind.

"Can I ask your advice about something, Martin?"

"Go right ahead, Professor."

"It's about your friend, the guy who caught me in the supply deck right after we left France," I said.

"His name is Damien," Martin said.

"Well, your friend Damien has been hounding me. What should I do?"

"First place, Damien is no friend of mine," Martin said. "Soon as I started learning to read, he said I was getting high and mighty, started giving me an ocean of grief.

"Second place, carry your knife. He's got one, you should, too."

"He carries a knife?"

Martin nodded. "Be careful, Professor. These days I always watch my back with him. Fact, I never keep my eyes off him when he's around. He used to tell me stories about the things he did in the past." Martin shook his head.

"Like what?" I asked.

"He boasted about running with a gang of murderers and thieves. Told me they snatched purses in broad daylight. They wanted trouble, and nobody stopped them. So, like I said, be careful."

"Well, thanks for the warning," I said, shivering.

I returned to the cabin, but I couldn't shake off the image of Rat—Damien—coming after me with a knife. I was already feeling tired and achy. A chill had seeped into my bones, and my throat scratched. All I wanted to do was sleep.

But first I had to find my knife.

CHAPTER 17.

July 20, 1767
Montevideo,
Rio de la Platte
23 weeks at sea

"Come along, Jean," my master called from his chamber. "You're holding me up." We'd been staying at the Viceroy of Peru's huge ranch on the outskirts of Montevideo for three days.

I opened my eyes. The Viceroy's servants had awakened us before dawn, but I'd fallen back to sleep. Summer in France was winter here, which meant July was the coolest month in the Rio de la Plata. The weather sometimes dipped near freezing on July evenings. Yesterday, I'd caught a chill, and this morning I could barely lift my head off the mattress.

My master came to the doorway of my tiny room. "Why aren't you ready?" he asked with annoyance. Patience was not Monsieur Commerson's greatest virtue.

"My head's throbbing," I said weakly. It felt like a vise was tightening over my temples.

"Then get some rest," he said, his voice softening to concern. "I've got visitors from the *Boudeuse* to help me today, but tomorrow I shall need you to be on your toes."

"Yes, sir," I whispered. "Thank you."

My master left and I fell into a deep sleep.

The crash of metal awoke me several hours later. The Viceroy's ranch was beautiful but noisy. It was built of stone and stucco with high vaulted ceilings that magnified every sound. All hours of the day, servants scurried around the house. Mornings they gathered in nooks and crannies, chattering like flocks of sparrows. Their voices accompanied the clatter of pots, pans, buckets, and trays.

Light filtered into my room through a single long window. I sat up, leaned over, and peeked out the curtain. The window overlooked a lush courtyard. I lay down again and looked up at the stucco ceiling. The sweet smell of baking bread wafted through the room. My headache had disappeared after my deep sleep.

Now I had the remainder of the day to myself. How would I spend my little holiday? I hadn't written in my journal for over a week. Today, I could catch up. But first, I would take a bath. The last time I'd had that luxury was by my Aunt Jackie's hearth six months ago, the night before we left for Rochefort.

There was more banging in the hallway—maybe a servant, who could help me get hot water. I hurried through my master's suite to the door. A young woman kneeled on the tile hallway beside a pail of soapy water. She had dark skin, brown eyes, and lashes that resembled black butterflies. "If you please," I said in simple Spanish. "Some water for a bath." The young girl looked at me and smiled, batting her butterfly eyelashes. "*Si, señor,*" she said.

She stood up and hurried down the hallway. I returned to my bed and took out my journal. A few minutes later, the girl entered my room with a tray of fresh bread, cof-

fee, sugar, and cream. She set the tray on a bedside table. Apparently, she hadn't understood that I wanted a bath. When I tried explaining again, the girl giggled, said *si, si, si*, and raced off.

Before long, I saw her pass my door with two steaming buckets. On her way back, she stopped in the doorway, beamed at me, and giggled again. After my experience with Albertina, I knew I must be careful.

When I finished eating, I checked the bathroom in the hallway. The room smelled like a field of lilies. I closed the door, latched it, and pulled the linen curtain across the window. Nobody could see me.

The big tub was steaming. I took off my shirt and unwound the scarf over my chest. My breasts tingled when I untied the scarf. Now I understood why my breasts had sometimes ached these past months: They had turned into large turnips. A servant girl had just mistaken me for a man, and my breasts were bigger than hers. The thought of it made me laugh out loud. My arms and legs and even my shoulders had filled out, too. They were now thick and muscular from my strenuous work.

I took off my pants and slipped into the tub. A layer of grime covered my body. I scrubbed my skin with a piece of thick wool and washed my hair.

The hot water relaxed my muscles. I closed my eyes. I don't know how long I slept, but I awoke with a start. I'd been dreaming about Monsieur Commerson. In my dream, we'd been dancing. It seemed so real that I had trouble returning to my senses.

I could still sense the pressure of my master's muscular arms around me. I could still see his striking olive eyes, strong jaw, and athletic build. Maybe Philibert Commer-

son was not a god like Captain de Bougainville, but he was much more attractive to me.

I got out of the tub, my heart racing, and dried off. Then I wrapped myself in a towel, stepped back to my room, and flopped onto the bed. How I missed being a girl.

I thought of the blue dress at the bottom of my bag. My dress and my journal were the only proof of my true identity. I carried them with me whenever I left the ship overnight. If anybody entered our cabin to pry, they wouldn't find this evidence.

I pulled the cotton gown from my bag and spread it on the bed. My father had scrimped to buy me this dress. When I tried it on for the first time, his eyes filled with tears. He hugged me and said I was the image of my mother. Then he told me how much he worried that he'd treated me like the son he always wanted.

The last time I wore the dress was to dinner with my father, my friend, and her mother. Rosalie's mother was a widow, and my father was a widower. They talked casually, as if they'd known each other for years. We set a date for another get-together. A few days later, my father got sick. We never did get together again.

I held up the lacy gown in front of me, walked daintily around the room, and swirled like a dancer. As I turned, the servant girl opened the door without knocking. Her eyes widened as they met mine. "Pardon, pardon, *senor*," she cried, before fleeing in horror.

As it turned out, I didn't have a minute to think about what had just happened – or the impression I must have made. There was loud commotion in the hallway: My master and the Astronomer were returning early from their trip. If they caught me like this, I'd be done for. *Hurry,*

hurry, hurry, I whispered, as I bolted the door and stuffed the dress into my bag.

I dragged on my pants and a sweater, seconds before they barreled into the suite, and my master barked my name. The layer of grime and grit that had been part of my masquerade for months had just disappeared in my bath water. But I had no time to dust my cheeks with ashes or to wrap the scarf over my breasts. Would my master notice?

As I unlatched the door, my dream of dancing with my master washed over me. I felt as if the wall between us was crumbling. When I opened the door and saw Monsieur Commerson a few feet away, I nearly fell over. He greeted me with a strange look, followed by a moment of distracted silence. Had he observed my breasts under my sweater – or the lack of stubble on my face?

"How do you feel?" he asked, as his eyes fixed on mine.

"Much better, sir," I said, my heart hammering. "Is something wrong?"

"No, no, no," he said, suddenly averting his gaze. "Nothing's wrong. I was just thinking of all the work we have to do. I just learned that we're about to sail for the Strait of Magellan. We can't linger here another moment. We have to return to the *Étoile* and prepare our herbaria. So hurry up. A coach is waiting to take us back to the harbor."

CHAPTER 18.

September 21, 1767

A cove near Montevideo

31 weeks at sea

As it turned out, the Bougainville expedition did not leave the *Rio de la Platte* in July. Our ship's hull hadn't stopped leaking since our departure from France, and everybody was wary about attempting the long voyage ahead with this problem.

We set up camp on a cove not far from Montevideo to make repairs. The first step was to move our ship onto dry land. This was no small task, as the *Étoile* weighed hundreds of tons. During high tide, we pulled her to shore with ropes, pulleys, and slides. Next we removed our ballast, the barrels full of old iron, stones, and gravel that remained in the hold to give the ship stability. Then we careened the *Étoile*, shifting our cargo and cannons to one side in order to tilt her.

After that, the dirty work began. Every deckhand was called upon to help with scraping barnacles and seaweed off her hull. Our carpenters changed more than 30 feet of keel. They also replaced rotted planks and filled the seams with oakum. Finally, we waterproofed the hull with pitch and tar. When one side was repaired, we worked on the other side.

"This is a nasty, never-ending job," Henri complained as he hacked at a tenacious barnacle.

"My wrists are so sore," Gérard said. "I feel like I've peeled a thousand potatoes."

"Ten thousand," Henri corrected.

"What a pack of babies," I said. "Why do you think you're being paid so handsomely?"

"Of course, we're all very grateful for our slave wages," Henri said. "Even so, I don't see why the scientists can't help. They'd learn a thing or two about these stubborn sea creatures if they joined us."

My mates were always insulting my master and his companions, and I was always defending them. "My master works harder than all of you girls put together," I said. "And *he* never complains."

"That's because he never puts in an honest day's labor," Henri quipped.

"He's really just a passenger," Gérard said.

"No, I'd say he's really just cargo," Henri added.

"Apparently, King Louis doesn't agree with you, Henri," I said.

Henri rolled his eyes. "The way you talk about your master, you'd think you were in love. What's wrong with you, Baret? He's a rich bastard, and you're just a working boy. Nothing will ever change that."

I restrained myself from answering Henri. He had hit far too close to the truth. I shut up and concentrated on my work. We still had another hour of scraping before our shift ended.

Lacy clouds filled the powder-blue sky. The warming weather was good news. We'd likely be entering the Strait of Magellan near the start of summer here, though the Strait was always cold, according to Martin.

Finally, the bells and drums sounded the end of our shift. Most afternoons, I joined my master for long jaunts in the countryside to find new plants. Today, I looked forward to another trip.

I started back along the shore toward our camp. To my surprise, I met my master, looking elegant and self-assured atop a golden palomino. Until now, we'd always traveled on foot to collect plants.

He explained: "I'm about to leave for a hunting expedition —jaguar hunting. You may come along if you care to. There are several extra horses just up the shore.

"I'll meet you there," he said, as he rode off

I'd heard jaguars roaring at night near the *Rio de la Plata*. Sailors claim that *el tigre* can wrestle a crocodile, chase a monkey up a tree, bring down a steer, or rip a giant turtle from its shell. Some jaguars are also said to be man-eaters.

I hurried after my master, not wanting to pass up this adventure.

When I reached the hunting party, my master handed me the reins of a small, brown steed. My father had owned a quiet old mare, and I often rode her when I was a girl—but this young horse was wild. I hopped on the saddle and gripped with my knees.

The hounds took off along a rocky tract near the river. Their baying filled the air, as they caught the scent of *el tigre*. My horse bounded after the pack, snorting and kicking up dirt. The smell of fresh grass and mud filled my nose. I bounced so hard that my bottom hurt, and my legs cramped from clenching. The scarf around my chest loosened, and my breasts banged as my horse galloped on.

We raced along a rocky path overlooking the river.

From the cliff, I could see our campsite. The *Étoile* rested on her side, a new shift working to scrape her clean. It was sad to see our ship grounded like a beached whale. She had kept us safe through many months of rough seas and angry storms.

Our sister ship was anchored offshore. The beautiful *Boudeuse*, or "bounding lass," stretched 120 feet in length. She was brand new with fresh paint from bow to stern. The *Boudeuse*, I had learned, weighed over 1,000 tons and carried 26 guns, which would give our enemies (or pirates) pause before troubling us.

My horse whinnied and dashed on. A few poor mestizos—half breeds of Spanish and Indian blood—were working in the fields at the side of the path. Women grabbed their children, and men scowled as the hunters charged past them.

Finally, the pack slowed down. Jaguars are fast creatures, but they get winded quickly. We cornered *el tigre* on a rocky bluff. The creature stretched at least eight feet long with an enormous maw. Black spots and rosettes covered its tawny coat. It roared, swung its huge paw, and shook its giant tail back and forth.

Our dogs growled and bayed, closing in on the giant cat. The men crowded forward. *El tigre* had not lost its fire. It swiped the two bravest hounds, and they died instantly. The other dogs withdrew, whining and cringing. One retreated into the path of my master's palomino. The jaguar roared again and pounced at the horse's flank, dragging it to the ground. *El tigre* was inches from the rider—my master. Trapped under his fallen horse, Monsieur Commerçon was now a jaguar's leap from death. "Sir, watch out," I shouted, moving my horse closer.

As Monsieur Commerson struggled to get out from under his horse, the desperate cat moved in. The other hunters yelled advice and orders, while the hounds howled in panic. *El tigre* shrieked, on the verge of striking again.

In the midst of this noise and confusion, my horse bucked. I flew off my saddle and hit the ground. My fall knocked the wind from me, and I could only watch as the jaguar bellowed. It was about to kill my dear master.

And then one of the hunters rode forward on a white steed, holding his gun in front of him. He looked like a hero from a child's fairy tale, coming to the rescue. All movement slowed down: The jaguar sprang in a long, slow arc. My master called out, as did the other hunters, who seemed to be mouthing their words. The dogs barked noiselessly. Then I heard a crack from the hunter's gun. I followed the bullet's track toward the jaguar. *El tigre's* great body stretched forward in a final effort before falling into a heap, only inches from my master.

As soon as I caught my breath, I headed for Monsieur Commerson. Was he injured? I wasn't sure. The crush of hunters, horses, and dogs blocked my path. When I finally got through, he was sitting up, looking dazed. Indians attended his wounded horse. "Are you hurt, sir?" I asked.

He shook his head and grinned. "Thanks to Prince Charles, I am perfectly fine."

Without another word, he stood up, dusted off his clothes, and rejoined the hunting party. I saw him shake hands with the hunter who had saved his life. Apparently, the man was a true-life prince.

The Prince bowed and tipped his hat.

The hunters built a fire. They reviewed every detail of the hunt, over and over and over. The Indians sliced *el*

tigre's flank. Soon they took the meat and some thin green branches to the fire for barbecuing. It was hard to believe that the majestic beast had come to this: The jaguar had nearly killed my master, and now they were about to eat it.

While the party feasted, the Prince retrieved a package from his saddlebag. Then he passed around glasses and poured whiskey.

"To the great new world!" he shouted.

"To the great new world!" they all answered.

CHAPTER 19.

Near the Strait of Magellan

December 1, 1767

41 weeks at sea

I sat on our cabin floor inspecting a box of pressed plants for vermin and rot, while the Botanist worked at his desk. "We'll be at the Strait of Magellan soon," he said, rising. "I'm going up. I want to be on deck when we sail into the narrows. You should come along."

"Thank you, sir," I said, as I finished my inspection. Four boxes down, sixteen to go.

We had collected thousands of plants in South America, and I was trying to get the collection ready for the next leg of our journey. I returned the box to the closet across the hallway, pulled on an extra sweater, and grabbed my drawing board. Whenever I had a chance, I wrote or drew pictures for my journal. I hoped to remember everything I saw.

It was sunny but cold on the quarterdeck. A bank of clouds loomed in the southwest. Green waves slammed the hull. The rigging creaked and groaned. The *Boudeuse* lay dead ahead, her great sails bellying.

I set up my drawing board and paints on a chest near the companionway.

Seals and penguins basked in giant flocks on the rocky beaches of New Grenada. Dolphins followed the *Étoile* like puppies chasing a butcher's wagon. Birds circled overhead and dove into the sea. The sky was filled with albatross, gulls, snipes, cormorants and terns. Huge whales also inhabited this stretch of the Atlantic, some as big as the frigate *Boudeuse*. I decided to paint one of those leviathans.

The crew was busy with a million chores, as the *Étoile* closed in on Cape Virgin Mary and the Strait of Magellan. They bantered and sang while mopping, polishing, and tending to the sails and lines. Even though the men were joking and singing, everyone felt apprehensive about the trial ahead.

According to the old salts, passing through the Strait of Magellan was like going through hell, only with ice instead of fire. Many ships had been lost in the Strait's maze of islands, underwater rocks, and narrow, twisted channels. Many others had been trapped in an icy prison of snow, hail, and violent wind.

On October 21, 1520, Magellan became the first European to sail into the Strait. Thirty-eight days later, he became the first to exit the passage into the Great South Sea, which he named the Pacific. To this day, the famous Strait has never been mapped in detail. Though 250 years have passed since Magellan's voyage, the Strait continues to defy adventurers and merchants alike. It remains a dangerous, treacherous, and uncertain path to riches and glory.

"Morning, Professor," Martin called from the companionway behind me.

"Hi, Martin. What're you doing?"

"Painting the rails."

Just then, a flock of small gray and brown birds passed

overhead and dove into the sea near the *Étoile*. "Petrels," Martin said, scowling at the birds. "Bad weather's on the way when you see petrels."

"That's just a superstition," I said.

"I seen it happen many times."

"You've been at sea a long time," I said. "I bet you've seen petrels in all kinds of weather."

Martin seemed upset by my comments, but he didn't argue. He just shrugged and continued painting. I'd picked up my master's habit of questioning every superstition I heard. The Botanist claimed that superstitions often make people do foolhardy things and prevent them from accomplishing greatness. Even so, I felt bad that I'd hurt Martin's feelings.

A few minutes later, a cannon blasted from the *Boudeuse*, and somebody shouted, "Cape Virgin Mary—dead ahead!"

Others picked up the cry. Soon most of the crew was on deck. Everyone had anticipated this moment for nearly a year. The *Étoile* picked up speed. Water sprayed across the quarter deck, as we rounded Cape virgin Mary. The Strait of Magellan was now in front of us.

A cloud bank moved in from the southwest, blocking the sunlight. A thick fog settled over the *Étoile*. Though chilled, I wanted to stay on deck to enjoy the excitement. Sometime tomorrow we'd enter the narrows to the Strait. My dreams were coming true. No woman had traveled through the Strait before. From now on, anything I did would be *the first time ever*.

And then my drawing board went flying into a bucket, and somebody laughed from the deck. When I looked down, I saw Rat peeking from behind the small companionway.

"What a shame," he shouted. "I bet your painting's ruined."

"Coward," I said, grabbing the water bucket and stepping toward the companionway. Sneak that he was, Rat always timed his attacks when nobody would notice. At the moment, everybody stood by the bulwarks, looking toward the Strait.

"What did you call me?" Rat said.

"You heard me. You're a coward."

"That's easy to say when you're up there with such important company."

I knew that Rat carried a knife, but he'd be afraid to take it out with so many people nearby. Wielding a knife on deck could land him in the brig or worse. I stepped down the stairs, waiting until I stood just above him. Then I threw the pail of water and turned to make my escape. Rat moved quickly, despite the water dripping down his face. He grabbed my foot and pulled me toward the deck.

I clutched a rail with my left hand, which slipped off the wet paint. Rat twisted my leg and laughed. "So I'm a coward, am I?" he said. "Well, let's see how brave you are now."

Fortunately, I was still holding the empty pail. I turned fast and smashed it against his chin. He howled and let go of my leg.

As I attempted a quick exit, he seized my shirt and yanked me back. I turned and butted him in the gut with my head. He bent over, swearing, and then I saw Martin come up behind Rat, grip his arm and twist it. "Apologize," Martin said.

When Rat gave him a look of disgust, Martin squeezed tighter.

"Sorry," Rat said.

"Make me believe it," Martin insisted.

"I am sorry."

Martin released Rat's arm, but not before kicking him in the pants. As he stumbled away, Martin and I laughed. When Rat had put a safe distance between Martin and himself, he shouted: "You're getting to be a 'fancy pants' with all your book learning, Martin. You're both going to be sorry for this." Then he disappeared down the main companionway.

Martin laughed again. "Are you okay, Professor?" he asked.

"Couldn't be better," I said, wiping my hands on my pants.

"Just remember what I told you before about Damien," he said.

"Damien?" I said, puzzled.

"That's his name, Damien."

"I forgot," I said. "To me, he's Rat."

Martin laughed. "Rat's a perfect name for him, but be careful," he said. "Whatever you call him, he's dangerous."

"I won't forget," I said. "Thanks."

I was grateful for Martin's help, which made me feel less alone. Though I'd lost Jacques, I'd made a new ally. Even so, I knew that I had to keep fighting back, or Rat—Damien—would never leave me alone. The freedom that came with a man's life wasn't exactly "free;" I had to fight for every grain of it.

As crewmen began putting down anchors for the night, I hurried back to the quarter deck to retrieve my board and paints. I could barely see the outline of the coast in the thickening fog: Time to turn in.

When I entered our cabin, my master was still absent, so I took out a picture that I'd been making him for Christmas. I also wanted to finish another hand-made booklet for Martin. It was the least I could do to repay him for helping me today. I set up my paints in the cabin and put my sketch on the cot to dry. Then I settled down to work.

I was deep into my painting, when Monsieur Com-merson entered the cabin. I slipped his present into the drawer under my cot.

My master pulled a packet from his overcoat, unwrapped it, and held up a small fish. "Where's Bandit?"

"I don't know, sir," I said. "I haven't seen her all day."

I checked Bandit's usual hiding spots: the drawers under our cots, my master's empty boxes, his desk drawers. No cat. I stepped into the hallway and called for her. Bandit didn't appear.

"Must be hunting," my master said.

But I thought of Rat and his last words to me and Martin: *You're both going to be sorry for this.*

CHAPTER 20.

At the Strait of Magellan

December 8, 1767

42 weeks at sea

The Bougainville expedition stalled at the entrance to the Strait of Magellan. Fog and gales blew in from Cape Horn, and currents from Cape Virgin Mary held back our ships. After seven days, the fog finally lifted, and sunlight warmed the decks.

Midshipman Donat found me after I'd finished with kitchen duty. "Baret, we need an extra hand on deck."

I joined my mates who were untangling ropes that had stiffened in the cold and re-coiling them. Gusts of wind swelled the sails. The *Étoile* moved into a narrow channel. We sailed past the skeleton of a ship that must have smashed there years ago. "Now that's a friendly greeting for you," Henri said.

"I wonder what happened to the crew," Gérard said.

"Take one guess," Henri answered.

We passed a rocky island where a colony of cormorants roosted. "That's the worst smell of my life," Gérard said.

"You're lucky you never had to go to the head after yourself," Henri said.

Just then, a canon blasted from the *Boudeuse* in the direction of the bird colony. The cormorants sounded a noisy alarm and rose together, forming a black cloud above our heads. The crew of our sister ship cheered loudly.

The *Étoile* cleared the channel. The wind cut through my sweater, but I barely noticed the cold: I felt so proud. I'd made it into the Strait of Magellan, the first European woman to visit this strange place. For every man on ship, it would be a day to remember. For me, it meant greatness and glory, even though I had to keep it to myself — for now.

We could see both sides of the continent from the deck. To starboard: Patagonia, the steep southern edge of South America. To port: Tierra del Fuego, with its bluish snow. On both shores, the Indians had built bonfires. Many of them were following us on foot or on horseback.

"The Indians are awful curious about us," Henri said. "I just hope they're friendly."

I'd been thinking the same thing. Seeing the Indians brought back my misadventure with Martin. I hadn't discussed it with him, or anybody else for that matter, though it gave me some nightmares.

Donat was still standing nearby. "These Indians are very friendly," the midshipman said. "From what I hear, Fuegians helped to rescue the crew of the Spanish *Conception* a few years back.

"And they're famous for their fires. That's how Tierra del Fuego got its name: 'land of fires'. Which reminds me, I must check on wood supplies for our stoves." Donat stepped away, halted, and looked back. "You're free to return to your master, Baret."

"Thank you, sir," I said.

And then Martin appeared at my side. "You got to come with me," he said.

I followed him to the berthing deck. It was nearly empty, as everyone was outside celebrating. I still felt uneasy going down there. It brought back bad memories of my first run-in with Rat and my visit with Jacques on the day Gérard got beat up.

I heard Michel's voice in the distance. "I found 'er down in the supply deck," he called.

Michel held a bundle, which he passed to me. It was Bandit, alive and hissing. After a week, I'd given up hope of finding her.

"She was huntin'," Michel said. "Look at the giftie she's got for you."

Our cat clenched something in her jaws. When I tried to take it, she growled like a panther. Michel chuckled and thumped her nose. "Should I keep this for your dinner, Baret?" he asked, holding up a dead rat.

"Thank you so much," I said, "but it's all yours. That's the least I can do for your help."

"Aren't you generous?" Michel said, laughing loudly.

By mid-afternoon, the *Étoile* and *Boudeuse* had anchored near Boucault's Bay on Patagonia. I joined my master, Monsieur Véron, and several officers in a longboat headed for shore.

"The Spanish named this area Patagonia in recognition of the Indians' patagones, or big feet," Monsieur Com-merson said. "The Patagonians are reputed to be giants. One of the mysteries that Captain de Bougainville hopes to settle during this passage is: What race of men are they?"

I was starting to believe that my master knew everything about everything.

The sun shone bright, but the air was raw. A rough current dragged against our longboat, and freezing waves drenched my clothes. And this was summer in the Strait.

Another longboat from the *Boudeuse* reached the shore before us. I recognized Captain de Bougainville disembarking. As we got closer, some Patagonians waded into the icy water toward our boat. They must've been used to this frigid weather, but I wasn't. My teeth were chattering, and my fingers were numb.

"*Shawa, shawa, shawa,*" they cried.

We returned their greeting and continued shouting it once we reached shore.

News of our landing spread through the Patagonian camps. Indian men arrived on horseback and on foot. Many Indian groups inhabited the valleys, highlands, and coasts of South America, I had learned. These Patagonians were covered in long skin cloaks, like the Indian who attacked Martin in the Rio de la Platte. They had round faces, white teeth, and reddish-brown skin. Their coarse, black hair was knotted at the top of their heads.

The Patagonians laid out piles of animal skins including vicuna and guanaco, two types of llama. These popular skins fetch great prices in Europe. Captain de Bougainville dispensed cakes to the crowd. His lieutenants opened chests with nails, fishing hooks, bracelets, looking glasses, and other baubles. To judge from their enthusiasm, these isolated people desired our trinkets as much as our officers wanted their furs.

My master, Monsieur Véron, and I left the trading party to search for flora near the shore. Though the climate is harsh, many plant species thrive in the Strait. Woodlands and meadows blanket the land. "Because the weather is so unpredict-

able, we may not have many chances to collect plants here," my master said. "Let's make the most of this opportunity."

Before long, a young Patagonian approached my master, tugging at the Botanist's jacket. The youth pointed at his red, oozy eye. He seemed to sense that my master might be able to help.

Monsieur Commerson fished a vial of dried herbs from his pocket and pulled a small iron pot from one of our boxes. He filled the pot with water from the Strait, mixed in a pinch of herbs, and passed the mixture and a cotton handkerchief to the boy. He used signs to show the boy to heat up the water in a nearby fire and apply a poultice to his eye. The boy grinned and sat down near the fire.

We stepped away. "Poor soul," my master said. "I'm not sure that my concoction will help. I wish I could do more."

My master's kindheartedness touched me. My mates often scorned the scientists and gentlemen who had joined the expedition for adventure. In the case of Monsieur Commerson, their criticism was unjust.

"These people live a miserable life in an impossible climate," Véron said.

"Yet they don't appear unhappy or discontented," my master said. "Like the flora here, the Indians have adapted and even prospered, under the most treacherous conditions."

The boy with the sore eye wasn't the only Patagonian who had noticed us. A small crowd gathered to watch us collecting plants. It might have been my imagination: The Patagonian men seemed to be staring at *me*, not at my master or Monsieur Véron.

I wasn't prepared for their attention. Nearly a year had passed since I'd left France, and no European had seen

through my disguise. Not my master, not my mates, not the men or women at our South American ports. Now these Patagonian men were following my every move.

My master and Véron paid our visitors short notice. Nobody could disturb my master's concentration when he was working, which was a blessing now. Monsieur Véron was busy farther up the shore.

Following my master's example, I hunched over a plant and started digging with my knife. Though I ignored our visitors, I was sweating rivers.

My strategy didn't work. The Patagonians crowded in on me. When I tried to press the plant I'd just unearthed, a young Patagonian pulled the plant from my hand. His friends laughed, encouraging his boldness. When he grabbed at my shirt and squeezed my waist, I hit him, and they laughed louder. What would he try next? The boy seized my hand and twirled me around.

Their interest in me ended when Captain de Bougainville took out a cask of brandy and began dispensing drinks. The boys ran up the shore to enjoy the latest entertainment.

Now it was my turn to stare. Each Patagonian swallowed his drink in a single gulp. He beat his throat with his hands, like he was putting out a fire, and emitted high-pitched sounds. For the Patagonians, liquor was both a luxury and a curiosity. I'd heard stories about the effects of "fire water" on Indians. They got very drunk very easily and then behaved badly, like drunkards in France.

The Patagonians begged for more, but De Bougainville's lieutenants took away the cask. The captain announced that it was time to leave. His officers picked up their chests and the animal skins they had traded. I packed up our equipment and followed my master to the longboat.

The Patagonians trailed us to the water disappointed to see the visitors with trinkets and "fire water" departing. Our long boats pushed off, and the Patagonians waded into the icy water. As our boats moved away, they serenaded us—and we called back: *Shawa, shawa, shawa*. Our good-byes echoed up and down the coast.

CHAPTER 21.

Strait of Magellan
December 25, 1767
44 weeks at sea

The sound of caroling woke me.

I loosened my cocoon of blankets and sat up. Bandit had curled up beside me during the night to stay warm. She slipped to the edge of my bunk and jumped down.

My master, who had been writing at his desk, turned around. He was bundled in many layers of clothing, including coat, hat, and gloves. "Good morning, Jean," he said.

"Good morning, sir," I said, "Merry Christmas." My breath condensed into a small cloud in front of my face.

"Is it really Christmas?"

"Yes, sir," I said, smiling at my master's forgetfulness. "Didn't you hear the caroling?"

"I guess I was too caught up in my writing," he said. "But I do wish you a very merry Christmas, Jean." He turned back to his journal.

My master never stopped working these days. The conditions in the Strait gave him an excuse: The midnight sun provided extra hours of light. The bitter cold made it harder to sleep. My master didn't care. He believed that sleeping was a waste of time. If he didn't *have* to sleep, he would never bother.

I thought of the gifts under my cot. I was eager to give my master his present, but the call of nature was stronger. I pulled the curtain around my cot and took care of my morning toilet. Then I threw on another sweater and a cap and raced to the quarterdeck to dump out the chamber pot. The quarterdeck was nearly empty. Everybody was holed up today with the ship at anchor.

The air was frigid. A brutal wind whipped across the ship, blowing snow into my face. I looked down on the spar deck. Crewmates chipped away at a layer of ice on the deck, slipping and sliding with every step.

After emptying the pot, I inched my way back to the companionway. Our cabin was freezing, but it felt warm compared to the quarterdeck. My master was still writing at his desk. I dug out his gift, a painted scroll of canvas, and dropped it beside his journal.

He looked up. "For me?"

"Yes, sir," I said.

He took off his gloves and unrolled it. My master didn't say a word, as he studied the picture of Bandit seated in a box of dried plants. Maybe he was embarrassed. Or maybe he didn't like it. Finally, he looked up again.

"Thank you, Jean," he said. "What a wonderful surprise. It must've taken hours, though I never saw you making it." He shook his head. "You're awfully good at keeping secrets."

If he only knew. I nodded and returned to my cot to write in my journal. My feelings were hurt, just a little, that my master had no gift for me. I told myself that the opportunity to work by his side was a great reward. Even so, I stifled a mild pang of disappointment before turning to my writing.

And then I heard Monsieur Commerson moving toward my cot. "I'm afraid that your gift has put mine to shame," he said, setting down a small package.

It was a book of plays by Molière, the master of comedy. "Thank you so much, sir," I said without looking up. I was grinning like an idiot.

"I hope those plays provide some comic relief from this foul weather and my bad temper."

A moment later, I answered a knock at our door. Midshipman Donat stood in the hallway. Behind him, Martin peeked over his shoulder.

"Good morning, sir," I said, "Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas, Baret," Donat replied. "And Merry Christmas to you, sir," he said, nodding to Monsieur Commerson.

"Merry Christmas, Donat."

"Baret's friend has something for you both," the midshipman explained before turning away.

"Come in, Martin," I said.

I closed the door behind him. Martin filled half the room. "Merry Christmas, Professor," he said, passing me a heavy canvas bag with a strap.

The bag held supplies for my artwork: squares of canvas (like the one I'd painted for my master), tins of paint, brushes, quills, ink, and many sheets of paper. "Thank you," I said.

Martin shook his head. "I'm the one to give thanks, Professor," he said. "All my life I wanted to read, but I thought I'd never learn. And now I can."

"Where did you ever find all these supplies?"

"I made the canvas bag and the sheets from an old sail. The rest I got in Rio de Janeiro."

Rio de Janeiro with its hot sands and lush forests was a faraway dream, though we'd left that fair city only three months ago.

Martin stepped to my master's desk and handed him a bundle wrapped in canvas. "It's the auk that was roosting in the main mast since early December, sir," Martin said. The auk had looked like a combination penguin and sea-gull, with black feathers on top and white feathers on the bottom.

"I remember that auk," my master said. "What happened to it?"

"It must've froze in the miserable cold, sir. Two nights ago it fell to the deck. When I saw it drop, I ran to claim it for you."

"Well, I'm sorry for the auk," he said, "but grateful to you, Martin. It will be interesting to dissect the bird" He paused. "When it thaws."

"If it thaws," I said.

"You're right about that, Professor," Martin said. "I been in some cold places in my day. I never thought it could get colder than the winter I spent in the North Atlantic, but this is worse. My mates all say it's the coldest cold they ever been through. Everyone is wearing every piece of clothes he owns."

"Why did Martin call you 'Professor,' Jean?" my master asked.

"I've been teaching him to read," I answered.

"Which is a miracle," Martin said.

My master looked both surprised and impressed. "That pleases me, Jean," he said. "Education increases a man's virtue as well as his happiness."

"Thank you, sir," I said.

I put Martin's gift on my bed and retrieved his present from my drawer.

"Maybe this will take your mind off the cold tonight," I said, handing Martin a booklet on botany that I'd written in simple language and illustrated.

He flipped through the pages with a contented smile. "Thank you, Professor. Thank you."

"And if Jean's book doesn't work, maybe this will take off the chill," my master said, passing Martin a tiny bottle of brandy.

"Thank you, sir. Thank you. I truly enjoy a sip of brandy now and again, though it's a rare enough treat."

Martin put the book and the brandy into another canvas bag and said: "I hear that Captain Giraudais plans to open the larders wide today, it bein' Christmas. There should be plenty of wine, too, so no man misses his home too sorely."

"No doubt, Captain de Bougainville will open his larders as well," my master said.

"If he makes it back today, sir," Martin said.

"Pardon me?"

"The captain left with a landing party on Christmas Eve," Martin explained. "He's not back yet."

"Why did he leave in the middle of a snow storm on Christmas Eve?" I asked.

"The snow cleared before he left," Martin said. "I remember, because we all called it a Christmas calm."

"De Bougainville plans to map the entire Strait," my master explained. "He has to take advantage of every chance he gets — Christmas Eve or no Christmas Eve. Véron left with him to take the lunars."

"He was expected back last night," Martin said. "He didn't make it, sir."

"Don't worry, Martin," my master said. "A little snow and cold will not kill the great Captain de Bougainville."

"I hope you're right, sir."

"I know I'm right," my master said. "De Bougainville survived Fort Carillion in Canada. He can survive a winter in the Strait. At least he's not dodging bullets here."

"The cold can kill you, too, sir."

"Do you know anything about Fort Carillion?" my master asked.

"No, sir," Martin said.

"There's a story—I've heard it from several sources—that says everything about the captain. It was during a battle against the English. The fort was under brutal attack. Cannon blasts filled the air. Bullets flew everywhere, day and night. De Bougainville took a shot to the head. Another young officer raced to his side. 'That poor devil De Bougainville has been killed,' he shouted on the verge of tears.

"A general overheard him. The commander shrugged and said, 'So, your friend De Bougainville will be buried along with many other young men. It's not the end of the world.'

"As it happened, De Bougainville had only suffered a surface wound. When he heard the offhanded comment about his death, he sat up. 'General, you appear to be easily consoled over my death,' he said. 'But I'll be hanged if you order me buried now, and, for that matter, damn you, sir.'"

We all laughed at the description of our captain swearing at his superior officer.

"The story is funny but it makes my point," my master said. "De Bougainville is a survivor. Never underestimate

our captain. We wouldn't be here today if it weren't for his bravery at Fort Carillion. King Louis rewarded him by financing this expedition, paying for the *Boudeuse*, and —" My master paused. "— generously lending him La Grande *Étoile*."

We laughed again. The *Étoile* was the butt of many jokes. The crew still spent hours at our ship's pumps each day, despite her careening in Montevideo. Even so, I appreciated the old lady. The *Étoile* had seen us through months and months of mountainous waves, treacherous winds, and violent storms. We were safe inside her old hull. And safety mattered most of all on a ship.

"I predict that De Bougainville will return long before the day is over," my master added.

"I'm sure you're right, sir," Martin said. "Now I got to hurry and wish Michel a merry Christmas. I'm on ice duty soon myself."

"I'll go with you," I said. "I'm not on mess duty until this afternoon, but I have something for Michel."

We came up behind Michel at the stove. He was stirring a pot of stew. In anticipation of Christmas, he'd been saving bits of this and pieces of that for weeks. Michel looked up and tipped his old feather hat at us. His goat nibbled a carrot from his back pocket (hence, the critter's name, Pockets). "A goat deserves something special on Christmas, too," Michel said, "and this ain't no ordinary goat, ye know."

"Yes, we know, we know," I said. "You remind us of Pocket's genius every day."

"I have good reason to remind you today," he said. "Watch this."

Michel put a small harness over Pocket's head. He

attached the ends to a tiny wheelbarrow that Romain had whittled. "Now you two stand over there," Michel said, pointing to the back of the gun deck.

Martin and I stepped around the anchor capstan toward officer's quarters. Michel placed a little bag inside the wheelbarrow. "Okay, Pockets, take it to them," he said.

Pockets obeyed, prancing toward us, wheelbarrow in tow. She halted while I retrieved the bag from her wheelbarrow. Then she returned to pull another carrot from — yes— Michel's pocket. I found two warm honey cakes in the bag.

"You must've knowed my stomach was growlin'," Martin said.

"Thanks Michel," I said passing him my scroll.

Michel unrolled my painting of his pet goat. "It's a beauty, Jean," he said.

"I tried my best," I said. "But I know it doesn't capture the full splendor of Pockets."

Michel laughed and passed us each another honey cake. Then he poured cups of tea from a pot and placed them on barrels near the stove. "Drink this before you visit the deck. The celebrations have started. This tea should keep you warm . . . for about ten seconds."

A blast of freezing air slapped my face, as I stepped from the companionway onto the deck. All sails were furled against the storm. Red ribbons decked our masts and lines. They whipped in the wind like hardy butterflies. I wondered how Captain de Bougainville could survive on shore. Then again, the Fuegians and Patagonians lived here year round.

A thick layer of ice coated the deck. A work crew chipped away at it day and night. Our only hope was to keep the ice at bay. The *Étoile* rocked back and forth, moan-

ing like a great beast in pain. I grabbed the bulwark to keep from falling.

Martin and I edged our way toward a band of carolers near the bow. They beat their arms against their sides as they sang. The wind howled a ghostly chorus. The crewmen's caroling made me think of my father, who had a fine baritone, but the bitter cold kept me from getting misty-eyed. Tears would have frozen on my cheeks.

And then a chunk of ice hit me back of the head. I turned. Where had it come from? Not a soul was in sight but the carolers. Probably fell from one of the masts.

And then it happened again.

Rat, I thought.

Still no sign of him, but I knew it was *Rat*. Even on Christmas day, my tormentor had caught me in an off-guard moment. It was another reminder to always stay alert.

Martin turned to me and pounded my shoulder. Luckily, I had a friend on ship, a big, strong friend. I decided not to say anything about *Rat's* sneak attack. No need to ruin Christmas for Martin.

A light snow began to fall from the thick clouds. Fuegan bonfires burned on shore. A world of endless snow and ice spread out beyond their campsite.

"Look there," Martin said, squinting into the snow.

I made out the shape of a longboat moving toward the *Boudeuse*. "Must be Captain de Bougainville and his mapping party," Martin said. "Monsieur Commerson was right."

We heard cheers from the *Boudeuse*. Word spread among the carolers. They whooped with relief and threw up their hats. "Merry Christmas, Captain de Bougainville! Merry Christmas!"

CHAPTER 22.

Strait of Magellan

January 15, 1768

47 weeks at sea

New Year's Day came and went, with our ships still trapped at the bottom of the world. Wind and storm held us in our ice prison. Yet we were never alone. The Fuegians kept watch through gale and fog. We spotted them every morning around their campsite, and their fires blazed through the short nights. Seeing them nearby reassured me: If they could survive here, we could, too.

After three weeks, the blizzard lifted. All told, we'd been in the Strait for five weeks. Just two months had passed since our departure from Buenos Aires, though it seemed like two years.

At dawn, the Fuegians launched their boats and paddled toward our ship. Their *piraguas* were constructed of bark and rushes caulked with moss. A small fire burned inside each one.

The short, stocky Fuegians climbed our rope ladders to the deck. Their only clothing was stringy sealskins. "Oh, my God, they stink," said Véron, coming down from the quarterdeck. "That's the gloomiest band I've ever seen. They're not a bit like the Patagonians. It's as if they're from different continents."

I, for one, hoped they were not a bit like the Patagonians. Those clever, handsome Indians had seen through my masquerade. If I was lucky, the Fuegians wouldn't pay me any attention.

"Look at that little boy by the mainmast," my master said. "There's nothing gloomy about him."

The boy, who appeared to be four or five years old was entertaining a group of my shipmates. One sailor gave him a wool jacket. Others handed him candy and trinkets. He grinned and hugged each gift, charming every soul.

I had no dreams of motherhood yet. Even so, I couldn't take my eyes off the child, who had the sweetest baby face in the world and eyes that sparkled with intelligence.

"And then my master shouted: "They've got Bandit."

"Where?" Véron asked.

"By the companionway."

We raced toward a group of Fuegians who were passing Bandit from hand to hand. My master grabbed our cat.

"I don't think they've ever seen a cat before," Monsieur Commerson concluded, as the Fuegians pressed in on him. "Bandit has enthralled them."

When he stepped toward the companionway, a Fuegian man blocked his path. He pushed a young teenage girl toward my master, pointing to the cat, to the girl, and back to the cat. The man repeated these gestures, jabbering all the while.

My master shook his head in disbelief. "I believe he wants to trade the girl for Bandit," he said.

Tears streamed down the poor girl's face, as she struggled to break free of the man gripping her arm. By now, a crowd had gathered around them.

"Take the girl," somebody barked. "We could use a female here." It was Rat, who was leering at the young girl.

Her eyes widened with fear. When she clawed at the man's hand, he slapped her and ranted angrily.

"Give him the scrawny cat," Rat screeched.

"Stand back," Monsieur Commerson said, glaring at Rat, who slunk away.

My master turned to me, his jaw set. "Lock Bandit in our cabin, Jean, and pack the equipment. We're going to Tierra del Fuego as soon as you return."

I hurried to the cabin and dropped Bandit on my quilt. Before gathering my master's equipment, I sat down for a minute. I couldn't shut the girl's frightened eyes out of my mind.

By the time I returned to the deck, the Fuegians had disappeared. I found Monsieur Commerson with Midshipman Donat, patting a skinny dog.

"What did you pay for him?" my master asked.

"A few nails, is all," the midshipman said, laughing.

"What's his name?"

"Voltaire."

Monsieur Commerson looked up with a smirk. "Are you saying that our celebrated French philosopher is a dog?" he asked.

The midshipman grinned. "No, you said that, sir."

My master laughed. "A point well taken, Donat," he said. Then he turned to me. "Let's go, Jean. The longboat is about to depart."

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A puddle of ice and water filled the bottom of the longboat. Bitter spray stung my face, and the wind cut through my sweater. Yet today's weather was mild compared to the past three weeks. I pulled down my wool cap and hunched over.

The Fuegians escorted our longboats toward shore. Upon landing, the officers unloaded jugs of brandy and crates full of the usual mirrors, fishhooks, colored glass, pins, nails, beads, small knives, cloth, and yarn.

My master and I left the trading party to hunt for plants along the shore. Despite the frosty terrain, many plants flourished there. "Some days, I cannot believe my good luck," Monsieur Commerson said, wide-eyed as a child. He dug out a plant and pressed it between two blocks.

As he finished securing the press, we heard screams.

"The Fuegians must have attacked our men," the Botanist said.

We raced toward our landing but saw no sign of a skirmish. Fuegians and Frenchmen stood shoulder to shoulder near the shore. What was happening?

Then I saw the boy who had enchanted our crew, lying on the ground, his limbs flailing. His eyes rolled, and blood streamed from his mouth and nostrils. My heart dropped to my wet boots.

"What happened?" my master asked Donat.

"Our men gave the boy some candy," he said. "Later, he got hold of some glass beads with sharp edges from one of De Bougainville's chests. I understand he ate a handful."

My master moaned. "Can't we do anything?"

"The Fuegians won't let us near the boy."

A medicine man chanted over the child. Brown and red paint covered the shaman from his head to his bare

feet. He stripped the jacket off the boy's tiny body and cast it away. The medicine man chanted, pressing on the boy's legs and stomach, while an old woman keened in the child's ear. The Fuegians howled and pounded their chests, pulled their hair, or threw themselves on the ground.

Meanwhile, De Bougainville's surgeon returned from the *Boudeuse* with milk and gruel. "Maybe it will coat the boy's stomach" my master said.

The shaman turned his back on our surgeon, but a woman took the gruel and fed the child. For a moment, the boy stopped shaking. He cried and then threw up bloody vomit. The woman tucked him in her arms, and he rested his head on her shoulder. The crowd was silent except for the shaman's chanting and the young girls' whimpering.

"We should leave," Captain de Bougainville ordered.

The officers closed the chests and loaded our long-boats. The Fuegians stayed at a distance, glaring at us.

As our boat glided toward the *Étoile*, nobody uttered a word. The shaman's chanting echoed across the channel.

I thought of the warm farewell that we'd received from the Patagonians just a few weeks ago. It was hard to believe that our visit here had come to this sad conclusion.

Soon after we reached the *Étoile*, I crept into my cot. We'd brought such grief to these poor people, whose lives were hard enough. I stayed in the cabin through dinner. My master sat at his desk looking at the little picture of his son. I believe he wrote a letter, as well.

That night, I heard keening from shore: The boy had died. By morning, the Fuegians had left, their fires extinguished.

Our men spoke in whispers. Wet snow began to fall, and fog settled over our ships. Would we ever see the sun again? Would we ever escape this icy trap?

CHAPTER 23.

Strait of Magellan

January 29, 1768

49 weeks at sea

Fifty-two stormy days had passed since we entered the Strait. A mountain of snow, ice, and hail had fallen upon our ships. Many days, I thought we'd freeze like the auk that fell from our mast. If this was summer in the Strait of Magellan, what did winter hold here?

This morning, I was cleaning pots on deck with some of the kitchen crew. Wispy clouds drifted in a clear sky, and sunshine warmed my face. At last, we were on the verge of exiting the Strait. The topic of conversation, however, had nothing to do with this achievement.

"I have a bad feeling about—" Gérard said.

"You and your bad feelings," Henri interrupted. "I don't want to hear it today."

"The last time I had a bad feeling, the Fuegan boy died," Gérard answered.

"You have a bad feeling *every* day," Henri countered.

"And bad things happen every day," I added. "But that doesn't mean your bad feelings brought them on, Gérard."

Henri grinned and slapped me on the back. "Exactly my point," he said.

Romain banged a pot with a spoon. "Listen, here," he barked. "For once, Gérard's right. We're going to pay for the damage we did in the Strait. Mark my words." Romain was a big man with salt-and-pepper hair. At twenty nine, he was a little older than most of the crew. The men always seemed to listen to him. "Just mark my words," Romain repeated.

As soon as I finished my stack of dishes, I stood up. I didn't want to hear any more gloomy predictions. I went to the quarterdeck to find my master and offer my services. Monsieur Commerson was chatting there with the Astronomer and Donat. The midshipman's brown dog sat nearby. I bent over to pat Voltaire.

"The men are still distressed about the Fuegian child," Donat said.

It seemed I couldn't avoid disheartening conversation, no matter where I went.

"I know the feeling," my master said, shaking his head. "I haven't gotten over it myself."

"It was the single worst day of our voyage," Véron said.

"It was one of the most depressing days of my life," my master said, "and I've had plenty of them."

"I've heard a dozen mates say that the spirits aren't done with us," Donat said. "We haven't paid the toll, a life for a life."

"If half the sailors' superstitions were true—" Véron said.

"If half their superstitions were true," my master interrupted impatiently, "we'd already be in our watery graves."

They all laughed.

"Look there," Véron said. He pointed toward Pata-

gonia. In the distance, a giant boulder perched atop a pointed peak.

"It looks as though it's about to drop," my master said.

"Astounding," Véron said.

"What keeps it there?" Donat mused.

"The Lord," Véron said.

"Amen," Donat added.

"Gravity," my master said.

They all laughed again. But the strange formation made me think of myself and my precarious position on this ship. For now, my secret was secure, but that could change. If it did, I'd tumble like a boulder down a peak. What would I hit on my way down? And where would I land?

Nobody here had a clue about me. All these months, only the Patagonians had seen through my disguise, and they were long gone. Besides, worrying would do no good. We were about to leave the Strait. For now, I wanted to put unpleasantness and worry behind me and savor this moment.

A few hours later, the horizon opened up in front of us. We passed a colony of penguins nesting on an island. The sea was getting choppy. At last, we had reached the Pacific Ocean.

Our crewmen brought out harmonicas, fiddles, flutes and drums. The officers took out a barrel of brandy. Some mates climbed the ratlines and settled in the rigging to nurse their drafts. Four hundred men (and one woman) cheered from our ships: "Long live the Kingdom of France! Long live King Louis the Fifteenth!"

The scientists slapped each other on the back. "We made it, by God, we made it," the Astronomer shouted.

"This is a great day for us all," my master said, "and a great day for France."

I gazed at the vast sea ahead of us, relishing my secret victory. Nobody knew it, but my accomplishment was different from all of theirs. I felt like climbing the main mast and shouting: *Stop patting yourselves on the back and look here. Look and remember. I'm the first woman to pass through the Strait of Magellan. Write it in your diaries, if you can write. And don't forget to tell your grandchildren about it: You sailed with Jeanne Baret.*

Of course, I kept those sentiments to myself. It was enough to imagine that one day, long after we had landed back in France, every soul on this ship might learn the truth. They might even brag about knowing me.

A celebration was in full swing on deck. My mates sang and danced. Cheers filled the air. A heavy swell rocked the *Étoile*. There was laughter and celebration.

Seagulls cawed overhead. Rolling waves tossed our ship. A blast of wind blew spray across the deck. The men cheered louder, inebriated with joy. Monsieur Véron tripped and bumped into a barrel. When my master lost his footing and knocked into me, we all laughed.

And then a scream pieced the air, followed by shouting. Crewmen raced across the crowded deck below. Voltaire whined, and the midshipman stooped to pat his dog. What was going on?

A second later, someone screamed the alarm: "Man overboard!"

Others picked up his cry. The ship bells tolled. Then silence and absolute concentration took over. The only

sound was the pounding of feet as the men moved to their assigned places on deck or climbed the rigging. Lieutenant Caro took immediate charge, trying to slow down the *Étoile* and bring her around as near as possible to the man. Unfortunately, our ship had been sailing at full speed in a brisk wind.

"Hold your sails," the lieutenant called out.

Every sailor knew what he must do. No one wasted an unnecessary word or motion. The ocean here was freezing cold. We didn't have a moment to spare. I raced to the deck and then to the bulwark, hoping to do my part. Martin spotted our mate first. "There he is! I see him there," he screamed, pointing aft and slightly to starboard.

Now the men aloft became pointers, helping the lieutenant to direct the ship. "Pass your sails," he ordered.

I strained and saw an arm wave in the rolling sea. "Over there, over there," I shouted along with the others. Monsieur Commerson was yelling, too. We all pointed toward the man. In the next instant, we saw our mate's head sink under a swell.

The ship had already headed right and was now coming around, back toward the coast. As the crew struggled to stall and slow the vessel, some men ran for ladders, boats, floats, loose boards—anything to throw in. I saw the man's arm and then his head bob to the surface in the heavy sea. We all shouted and pointed in his direction. Meanwhile, the *Boudeuse* had slowed and made its turn. Every mate kept watch on both ships.

A minute later, the *Étoile* reached the spot where the man had fallen. Several ladders went down. Sailors climbed to the bottom of each one. They hung on, ready to grab a limb. But the man had disappeared. I thought of Jacques

and imagined his bloated body. A chill ran up my back. Just this morning Gérard had predicted something awful would happen. We had all mocked him, but he was right.

The *Étoile* and *Boudeuse* remained in the area, looking for any sign of our shipmate. Alas, the man was gone. The crew stood at their posts or leaned against the bulwarks, looking storm-struck. Nobody said another word. Some mates went below deck to put away musical instruments. Lieutenant Caro carried off the brandy. Our celebration had become a funeral, the ocean a graveyard. Captain Giraudais walked across the deck, speaking to his officers in a hushed voice.

I saw Martin and raced over to talk to him. Martin always learned ship news before the rest of us. He grimaced when he saw me. "I'm sorry, Professor. It was one of your mates on mess duty – poor Gérard."

My throat tightened. I couldn't breathe. I stood there looking at Martin, not able to say a word. Of all people, how could this happen to Gérard? He was the most cautious man on ship, and the most scared. Just this morning, he'd predicted something terrible would happen. It was too strange to believe. I just shook my head.

"When the ship plunged, he went over," Martin said.

"Rat," I whispered.

"No," Martin said. "It was the spirits, Professor."

"You already told me Rat ran with murderers, and he hated Gérard."

"Rat's bad to the bone, but it wasn't him. I know you don't like to hear it, but it was the spirits."

I shook my head again and gasped in grief.

"Now we paid for the damage we did in the Strait," Martin said. "We brought death on that Fuegan boy, so they

took one of ours. The spirits always make a ship pay. It's been that way since Magellan first came through the passage. And it always will be." Martin held his jaw tight, still expecting a counter-argument from me.

But I didn't respond. A stab of guilt passed through my chest. What if Martin was right, or partly right? What if it wasn't Rat, after all? What if it was me? What if I was a Jonah, who brought misfortune in my wake? Two of my closest friends had died terrible deaths, first Jacques and now Gérard. What if it was me?

Some sailors believe that a woman is bad luck on a ship. I'd given little credence to this notion before. From my master, I'd learned to scorn such superstition. Even now, reason told me that it made no sense. Anne Bonny and Mary Reed had worked on ships unbeknownst to their pirate mates for years, without bringing on destruction. Captains sometimes took their wives along on voyages. Most likely, countless other women had gone to sea for need of work or love of adventure, sailing anonymously among their mates, their true identities never discovered.

Yet I could not suppress my guilt or fear. What if I'd brought this disaster on my mate?

CHAPTER 24.

South Pacific Ocean

February 5, 1768

50 weeks at sea

I lay on my cot with my eyes closed. My throat felt raw and my body ached. Sweat beaded on my forehead, and my shirt was soaked through. My master had left the cabin for an early meeting in the officers' salon. Before he went, I had promised to continue cataloging our plants. But I never left my bed.

We had over a thousand specimens to preserve and draw. We'd both been working without a break for many days as we sailed through the South Pacific Ocean. I couldn't remember when my throat had started hurting, because I'd ignored the pain. Now it felt as if I'd swallowed broken glass, like that poor Fuegan boy.

I slipped into a restless sleep and dreamed of my father. The dream seemed so real, I could smell his scent around me.

"What's wrong, Jean?" he asked. He was seated on my cot. "Are you sick?"

I opened my eyes and saw a bleary face. "Father? How did you get here?" I asked.

He didn't answer, but he felt my forehead. "My God, you're burning up," he said.

"How did you know I was sick, Father?" I asked.

"It's not your father," he answered softly. "It's me, Commerson. You've got a terrible fever. We need to cool you down."

He stood and I heard him shuffling around the cabin. "Sit up," he said a moment later. "You have to drink this." He held a cup of water by my lips.

I took a sip and groaned. "My throat hurts too much," I whispered.

"You must drink, Jean," he said.

I took another sip and he urged me on. "Drink some more, even if it hurts."

Finally, my master put down the cup. "I'm going to get a bucket of water," he said. "I'll be right back."

I heard him walk to the door and exit the cabin. I don't know how long he was gone, as I dozed off. I awoke to the creaking of the door and the pounding of my master's boots. The noise made my head ache.

"This should cool you down," he said, pressing a cold compress over my forehead.

My master refreshed the compress several times. "You're still boiling," he said, his palm on my forehead. It made me smile to hear the worry in his voice.

"Let's get that sweater off," he said. "Then we can give you a good swabbing to really cool you down."

His words jarred me to my senses.

The thought of his surprise and my humiliation sharpened my wits. I had to stop him from taking off my shirt. "I don't need a swabbing, sir," I said. "I feel a chill coming on. Please. Please, just cover me up."

I pretended to shake and shiver. My master pulled an extra quilt gently over my shoulders. "Don't worry," he said

kindly. "I'll think of something." He seemed to be trying to reassure himself as much as me.

My master stepped away from my cot and went to his desk. He took down a book, leafed through it, and then stopped to read. A few minutes later, I heard him opening drawers. He left the cabin again without saying another word.

Soon he returned carrying a pot. "There's an epidemic of sore throats on the ship," he said, placing the pot on his desk. "The ice we brought on in the Strait for drinking water was probably tainted."

He poured more liquid into the water cup. "I've made a potion that you must drink. Now sit up."

He handed me the cup. "It may sting, but drink it anyway."

The vinegary liquid made my mouth pucker and burned my throat. "Drink it all," he said. "I know the taste is god-awful but it should help."

I finished and put down the cup. "That's my boy," he said.

I lay down and closed my eyes. My master pulled the quilt gently over me again. "Now don't worry. You're going to be fine. Just rest."

When I awoke, Monsieur Commerson was gone. He had left a pot of tea and toast by my cot. Miraculously, the aching in my throat had lessened. I sipped the tea without discomfort. My stomach growled, and I nibbled on the toast.

Feelings of gratitude welled up in my throat and made it throb. My master had taken such good care of me today. It was no wonder that I loved him.

The feeling shocked me and made me smile at the same time. It also brought tears to my eyes.

Yes, I loved him.

At that moment, Monsieur Commerson entered the cabin. My cheeks heated up, and he smiled. "Your coloring looks much improved," he said, before glancing at the tea and toast by my cot. "And I see you're eating. That is a good sign. It seems we have a cure for our epidemic. Captain De Bougainville will be pleased."

"I expect I'll be back to work by tomorrow," I said.

He shook his head. "Jean, you are certainly diligent, and I appreciate your enthusiasm, but you must rest until you're well. We don't want a relapse," he said. "Which reminds me." He stepped to his bunk, pulled out a drawer, and retrieved a package.

"To thank you for your hard work and dedication," he said, placing the parcel on my quilt.

I untied the black cord and removed the brown paper. It was a plant press.

"Now it's official," he said. "You have joined the select ranks of botano-maniacs. You too have acquired an extreme desire to locate every undiscovered plant the world may hold without regard for your health or your sanity."

He laughed and I was speechless. My master was usually stingy with his praise. But he had just paid me a high compliment. The Botanist himself had often risked life and limb in pursuit of new discoveries. I'd heard his stories about floods, avalanches, and wild animals that had nearly killed him while he searched for plants in Europe. My master scorned botanists who spent all their days working at a desk or tending a garden at home. And today, he had welcomed me into the illustrious ranks of true plant adventurers. This was the proudest moment of my life.

Feelings of tenderness flooded over me. It took all my strength to keep from throwing myself into his arms. For

the first time ever, I was truly in love. This should have been the happiest moment of my short life, but it was tinged with sadness, and I knew why immediately: My affection would never be reciprocated because of the gulf between me and this wonderful man. Even if it were somehow possible to bridge that gulf, Monsieur Commerson would never forgive me for my long deception when he found out.

Yet I had neither the strength nor the desire to fend off my feelings. For the moment at least, I relished my love.

Commerson returned to his desk. I held the plant press to my chest and closed my eyes.

"Philibert," I whispered.

CHAPTER 25.

South Pacific Ocean

March 21, 1768

1 year, 4 weeks at sea

I sat on the floor of our cabin, sifting through the herbaria. Each cedar box contained a collection of pressed plants organized in order of discovery. We kept detailed information on every plant: location, size, color of leaves and flowers, and arrangement of branches. I was checking for mold, vermin, and rodents. These pests could ruin weeks of hard work. A rat family nesting in one herbarium had chewed and crushed its contents.

"I've checked this one," I told my master. "It looks good." I stooped down, lifted the box, and placed it beside his desk.

"Onward," he said.

The sore throat that had afflicted me six weeks ago was long gone. Now we all faced other problems, starvation and thirst. Only my work kept my mind off food and water. It also helped me keep at bay my feelings for Monsieur Com-merson — and my growing guilt about betraying him.

These days, every cupful of water came with a blot of slime. Our salt pork was rancid, our beef tack moldy, and our carrots and potatoes rotten. Our biscuits were as hard as the soles of my boots. I'm not sure which would taste

worse. We dunked the biscuits in hot coffee in the morning. When they softened, worms floated to the surface. We skimmed off the worms, ate what was left, and barely kept it down.

The truth was, no sooner would I swallow the putrid food than it would come up. No wonder my pants were in danger of falling off.

I had just started inspecting another herbarium when Monsieur Véron came to our door. Though gaunt from our starvation diet, the Astronomer still looked stylish and handsome. "We're finally closing in on an island," he said. "We should be landing soon."

Commerson brightened. "I'll be right up," he said before turning to me. "Come along, Jean."

"But the herb—"

"There will be plenty of time for the herbaria," he answered firmly.

Before we reached the quarterdeck, I heard shouting. Men crowded the bulwarks below us, pushing and shoving for a view of the island. Yesterday, a lookout had glimpsed a swelling on the horizon, a sign of land. Everybody had been hopeful, and now they were overjoyed.

"It looks like we're about to run aground," Véron said.

"It only seems that way," Donat assured us. "We're still a long distance from shore." The midshipman's little dog sat by his side. Voltaire followed Donat wherever he went.

The *Étoile* sailed closer to the island, its tree-covered peaks seeming only yards away. The smell of plants filled the air. It was like standing in the middle of a thick green forest. Heavy waves rolled, crashed, and foamed onto the shoreline.

"We won't be landing there, not with those breakers,"

Donat said. "Just look at them. Besides, I don't see a safe place to anchor." Donat's little dog from Tierra del Fuego howled, and everybody laughed uneasily.

On the deck below, the pushing and shoving increased with this new disappointment. Hunger had turned the crew meaner and testier than ever. To make matters worse, my mates suspected that, while they starved, the officers were eating well. Their suspicions were half true. Everybody on ship was hungry, but deckhands always suffered more.

The *Étoile* and *Boudeuse* sailed on toward a second island hard by the first. Yesterday, the swelling on the horizon had appeared to be a single island. Today, it turned out to be a string of them. Anticipation built again, until we saw furious waves breaking near the coast. Then two more islets hove into view, with more disappointing results.

The frustration on deck kept mounting. Soon, the men were brawling. Donat raced down the companionway swinging his club.

"The crew is so angry it's scary," Commerson said.

"For once I don't blame them," Véron said.

"If everybody stays calm, we'll be fine," Commerson said.

"We might not," Véron said. "We're having the luck of Magellan. The way things are going, we could all be dead soon."

"Seven weeks in the Pacific have turned you into a pessimist," Commerson said.

"No, sir, I'm just a realist," Véron replied.

"Come now," my master said. "Magellan lost four of his five ships, most of his crew, and, finally, his own life. We're mostly safe and sound aboard the two vessels we started with."

"For the moment that's true, but half the men are sick with scurvy," Véron said. "You know, last night" He stopped himself and shook his head.

The Astronomer was not the only pessimist on board. Everyone was alarmed about the threat of scurvy. This terrible disease always accompanied long voyages. It wasn't uncommon for scurvy to take down most of the men on a vessel.

"You started to say something about last night. What happened last night?" Commerson asked.

"Just a bad dream," Véron said. "But it left me feeling shaky."

"So what was your awful dream?" Commerson asked. "French pastries disappearing from the pantry?"

"I dreamt that Magellan paid me a visit," he said. "It gave me the shivers to have the old seaman pay his respects."

"To be honest, it would give me the shivers, too," Commerson said.

Every sailor knew Magellan's tragic tale. The old salts had recounted the details for the rest of us. These days the story was repeated time and again. It cast a dark pall over the *Étoile*. Magellan's ships had drifted through the South Pacific for over three months after leaving the Strait. During that time, they ran out of fresh food and water and discovered only two sterile islands. Though nearly 250 years had passed, the South Pacific was still uncharted today. We had no idea when, where, or if we'd make a landing. Today's failure would only add to the alarm.

Captain Giraudais walked the quarterdeck with his usual confident air, trying to boost morale. He knew what everybody was thinking. "Those aren't the last islands in these seas, Lieutenant," he said, slapping Caro on the

shoulder but saying it loud enough for everyone to hear. The captain's stern brown eyes displayed no sign of worry. "And this isn't the sixteenth century. We'll all return to France safe and sound with great yarns to regale our families and friends."

"Yes, sir," the lieutenant said with a look of admiration. Our captain was displaying the very definition of leadership.

"Bring out the brandy, Caro," Giraudais said. "Give each man a cupful, and tell the men that tomorrow may be our lucky day."

After Giraudais finished his rounds, he joined the scientists, who were still talking on the quarterdeck. Véron asked the captain's advice on a question of longitude, and the captain invited him and Commerson to his quarters. The thought crossed my mind that Captain Giraudais might hand out extra rations to the scientists.

I turned my attention to Lieutenant Caro who was dispensing brandy to the crew and trying to calm the angry mood on deck. At that moment Rat approached the lieutenant with his cup. The Lieutenant filled it, whispered something, and patted Rat on the shoulder. It was disconcerting to see him so familiar with the beast.

"We don't know where the hell we are, do we Lieutenant?" one of the men grumbled.

"As the captain said, you don't need to worry," the lieutenant answered passing the man a cup. "We'll all be fine."

"The way we're going, we'll be sailing from one island to another till we all die of scurvy," the man added.

"We're exploring these islands," the lieutenant said. "It's all part of Captain De Bougainville's plan. Now take your drink and shut up."

By now, the men stopped protesting as they turned their attention to the brandy. For the moment, this indulgence seemed to relieve everybody's frustration. But the men had trouble holding their liquor. Because of the lack of food, it made them lightheaded, and some crewmen could hardly stand up.

I slipped away to find Martin for a reading lesson. He was on deck, leaning against a barrel, his eyes closed. In his lap was a sail he'd been repairing.

"So now you're sleeping on the job," I said.

"You've figured me out, Professor," he whispered weakly.

"You better get up, or you'll miss your shot of brandy," I said. "The lieutenant is serving it up right now."

Martin didn't respond. His eyes were glazed, his skin sallow and spotted with bruises. "You're sick," I said.

"No, I'm just tired and hungry, is all," he answered, forcing a smile. When he closed his eyes again, he let out a groan.

My throat tightened. From what I'd heard about scurvy, I was sure that Martin had it. His weakness, fatigue, awful skin color, and bruising were all signs. I hurried to the gun deck to find Michel and get his help. Michel grabbed Henri, and we all raced to the deck.

"Open your chops," Michel ordered. Martin's mouth and gums were bloody.

"You're right, Baret. It's scurvy. Let's get him to sick bay."

Martin felt like dead weight, as we towed him toward the companionway. Even with our support, he could barely stand upright. When we passed our crewmates on deck, they shook their heads. It was disheartening to see this giant of a man so weak and vulnerable. But Rat gloated,

most likely contemplating the trouble he'd make with Martin out of the way. Judging from the smirk on his face, I knew nothing could make him happier.

Somehow we got Martin down the companionway without dropping him or crushing ourselves. Romain, who was cleaning the stove, raced ahead and opened the door to sickbay. Vivez stepped out to meet us. "Third case of scurvy today," he said, as we guided Martin through the doorway. "Worst case yet."

A lantern illumined the small room filled with sick men. We set Martin on a mattress and tried to make him comfortable. "Rest," I said. "I'll be back soon."

His mumbled response was inaudible.

I followed Henri to the deck, feeling sad and scared. We'd lost Gérard two months ago, and Jacques ten months before that. I wasn't prepared to lose another close friend on this voyage.

Henri, who used to be good for a laugh most days, was always glum. He'd taken Gérard's death hard. "Martin's only going to get worse and worse until he dies, and then it'll be me or you after that."

Luckily, shouts from the deck ended this depressing drift, and we joined Romain at the bulwarks. The *Étoile* was approaching another island, the fourth of the day.

Tall bronze natives ran along the coast. This was a good sign: People meant food, water, and a place to rest and regain our strength. Henri, ever the pessimist, saw a dark cloud inside the silver lining. "They're carrying pikes," he said.

"Magellan ran into cannibals in the South Pacific," I added, catching his pessimism like a cold.

"They don't look friendly at all," Henri said. "The captain should steer clear of them."

"De Bougainville may decide that we have to land, no matter what," Romain said. "A fight with savages is not as dangerous as starvation and scurvy."

I wasn't so sure. Which would be the worst way to die, starvation or a cannibal's stewpot? I thought about Joan of Arc, the great French heroine who had saved our kingdom from English invaders three hundred years ago. She was burned at the stake. I'd always believed that would be the worst way to go. Now I wasn't certain. I'd formed my past opinion before nearly starving to death on this ship. At least cooking in a stew pot would be quick. Starvation was long, slow torture.

"I'd take my chances with the savages any day," Romain concluded.

"I don't know," Henri said. "That's how Magellan died, murdered by islanders."

As it turned out, the island was tiny, no more than a mile in diameter. It also had a rocky coastline with battering waves. The *Étoile* and *Boudeuse* turned out to sea — again.

The island faded in the distance. As it did, we all sank into a dark pool of desperation. The sun began to set, and we stopped talking. A thick drizzle fell from low gray clouds. My mess mates returned to their kitchen chores. I went back to our cabin to check another herbarium. Even my work couldn't keep my mind off my stomach or my sick friend.

I wondered when —or if— we'd find another safe harbor.

CHAPTER 26.

South Pacific Ocean

April 3, 1768

1 year, 6 weeks at sea

"Sit up, Martin," I ordered.

Martin slowly raised himself and leaned against a wall behind his mattress in sick bay. I held a cup of liquid to his lips. "Drink this," I said, and he sipped it slowly.

Rumor had it that British sailors no longer contracted scurvy during long voyages. A citrus drink in their diet was said to explain this miracle. For that reason, Captain De Bougainville himself had prepared a concoction of powdered lemon and sweetened water, which I was now coaxing Martin to drink. But his splotchy skin, bleeding gums, and stiff joints were worse than ever.

My master suspected that British spies had supplied us with false information. He believed that they were concealing the true ingredients. Such was the fierce rivalry between England and France.

Before Martin could finish his drink, we heard shouts in the hallway: another island sighting. After dozens of false alarms, I was in no hurry to race to the deck. Martin groaned as he collapsed back onto the mattress. I patted his brow with a cotton handkerchief. Seeing him so weakened made me think of Jacques Jacain. It was nearly a year since

Jacques' murder in Buenos Aires. Back then, Martin was my tormenter. I couldn't have imagined this giant of a man so frail and vulnerable. Or that I'd be concerned one grain for his health.

Henri appeared in the doorway. He stooped to pass through the low opening. "Baret, you got to come up to the deck," he said, "and hurry." Something in Henri's voice convinced me to join him. He sounded cheerful for the first time in many weeks.

"I'll be right back," I promised Martin.

By now, I knew he was too weak to respond.

I followed Henri to the companionway and started up the ladder. Before I reached the top, I smelled trees and flowers, followed by a scent of meat that made my mouth water.

As I came onto the deck in the bright sunshine, I heard the crew's cheers. The *Étoile* and *Boudeuse* had entered a turquoise lagoon off a large island. Mountains soared overhead. Our ship seemed about to crash into those green towers. A waterfall cascaded into the sea, sending up a mist that reached our deck from shore and kissed our cheeks. I grew dizzy from the symphony of sights, sounds, and smells that overwhelmed my starved senses.

Lean, half-naked islanders sprinted along the coast. Dugout canoes and outriggers with curved bows glided toward us and surrounded our vessels. Bronze-skinned men shouted at us from these boats.

"*Taio!*" they cried. "*Taio! Taio!*"

They sounded friendly, but were they just cannibals eyeing their next dinner? I was so hungry, so desperate for a resolution of our long starvation, I didn't even care.

Our men kept leaving their posts, rushing to the bul-

warks, and calling back to the islanders. Lieutenant Caro barked orders and shouted threats from the deck. He was doing his best to keep his sailors at their stations.

Midshipman Donat climbed down a ladder on the side of the ship to barter with some islanders who had arrived with baskets of exotic fruits and nuts. It took all of ten minutes for Donat to make a deal, but to my howling stomach it seemed like ten hours. Soon officers were passing around platters full of sweet potatoes, nuts, and bananas, as well as unfamiliar fruits.

I noticed Monsieur Commerson on the quarterdeck beckoning me to join him, so I hurried up. "Eat and be merry," he said, pointing to the platter in front of him. My mouth watered like a dog's, and I almost dove into the tray. Nothing in my life has ever tasted sweeter or fresher.

More small boats surrounded our ships. Some held slender, dark-skinned women with sweet faces and thick, black hair garlanded with flowers. Our bounty of food was now overtaken by a bonanza of beauty. At every opportunity, our men slipped to the bulwarks or climbed the rigging to gaze at these island goddesses.

A few sailors shouted crude comments. The lieutenant reprimanded them and threatened to use his club. The men returned to their chores, but they continued to look over their shoulders. Whenever they could, they slunk back to the bulwarks.

Just as the lieutenant reestablished some order, an islander climbed the ropes and boarded the *Étoile*. The tall, broad-shouldered young man was so handsome that I couldn't take my eyes off him. He sauntered the decks like a captain, inspecting our rigging, examining the wheel, and studying our compasses. His self-confidence suggested

high rank. Clearly, he was used to doing as he pleased. Maybe he was a prince of the island.

A few minutes later, a female, as regal and elegant as the island prince, climbed aboard. Her black hair reached to her waist. A garland of scarlet flowers hung from her neck. She wore a loose shift of blue-green fabric knotted at the shoulder.

The men stopped their work to gaze at her, their jaws dropping to their boots. Lieutenant Caro raced toward the couple. I'm not sure whether he intended to escort them from the deck or to protect the gorgeous woman from our love-starved men.

Either way, he didn't reach them in time. The prince spoke to the maiden in a lilting, mysterious tongue. They exchanged mischievous glances. Then she smiled, untied the knot at her shoulder, and let her shift fall to the ground. There was a moment of complete silence, followed by a resounding cry of *YES! YES! YES!*

The naked woman with the body of Aphrodite swirled in a circle, as our mates shouted encouragement, whistling, clapping, and cheering. Lieutenant Caro wiped a broad smile from his face before blowing his whistle. "Mind your manners, men," he yelled, to no effect. "Mind your manners."

I glanced at Commerson, his eyes transfixed on the island woman. He wore a silly grin that matched the expression of every man aboard ship. Even Lieutenant Caro could not stop smiling now, which helped to explain his present troubles with ship discipline.

I was the only member of our crew still eyeing the handsome prince. He glowed with pride and amusement at the effect of his princess upon my shipmates. I dropped my gaze, not wanting to betray myself.

Finally, Lieutenant Caro escorted the couple to the bulwarks and watched them descend the ropes into a waiting canoe. All the while, my shipmates howled *NO! NO! NO!* The lieutenant blew his whistle again and shot stern looks at the men, silencing them at last.

Then I noticed Monsieur Commerson staring at me. Had he seen me gazing at the island prince? "Your face is bright red, Jean," he said, raising his eyebrows. "And you seem anxious. What in the world could be bothering you?"

Commerson's question flustered me, and I could see that he was enjoying my discomfort. Somehow I managed to find an answer, inept though it was. "I've never seen a naked girl before, sir," I lied.

He roared with laughter, and I blushed again, though now from shame as well as embarrassment for my continued deception. "This is your lucky day, isn't it?" he said.

Commerson shared the joke with Véron, who grinned and laughed as well. Soon every officer in the vicinity was pounding me on the shoulder and offering congratulations: Finally, I'd seen a naked girl. I was relieved that my master believed my story but troubled by the sudden attention it brought me.

A surge of guilt deepened my discomfort. My lies were piling up. I'm sure I blushed and, perhaps, I trembled. The officers' teasing continued until they finally turned their attention back to our feast.

My stomach grumbled, and for the first time in many months, I was able to answer it — with a second portion.

CHAPTER 27.

Tahiti

April 4, 1768

1 year, 6 weeks at sea

"I just wish I had the knack of drawing," Michel cackled. "I'd have painted the expression on his face when he crawled on board." Michel leaned against the stove, laughing with Romain. His eyes welled up, and his head shook. The feather on his old hat swayed with his guffaws.

I had just stepped out of officers' quarters, carrying boxes and tools. Commerson and I were about to leave for our first day of plant hunting on Tahiti, the islanders' name for their paradise.

Michel waved me over. "What's so funny?" I asked.

"Henri!" Michel exclaimed, but he was laughing too hard to continue. Finally he regained control and started again. "He slipped away from the *Étoile* last night."

"Henri left the ship without permission?" I asked. "What was he thinking?"

"There was just one thought in his little brain: Get to that island," Michel hooted.

"How did he do it?"

"He slipped away after dinner, when everybody was sleepy from eating too much. Then he climbed down a lad-

der and swam to shore." Michel chuckled, his eyes wet and swollen. He was trying hard not to fall down laughing.

Come to think of it, Henri had discussed the logistics of an illicit trip to "the island of love," the name that our men gave to Tahiti. After a few hours in the blue lagoon, Henri had turned into an eager, happy-go-lucky fellow again.

"So what happened to him?" I asked.

"Henri was bound and determined to find himself an island princess." Michel took off his hat and wiped his eyes. "But the princesses found Henri before he found them. Grabbed him and carried him off to a hut." Michel bent over roaring.

"What did they do to him?" I asked forcing a grin, as fear rather than laughter rose in my throat.

"They peeled off every stitch he was wearin'. Then they held him down and inspected him inch by inch. They must have been checkin' to see whether Frenchmen have all the usual parts." Michel snorted with glee before stopping to catch his breath. But his story sent shivers up my spine.

"When they let Henri up, he flew back to the *Étoile*. Sorry to say, that wasn't the end of his bad luck. Captain Giraudais caught him slippin' back on board, naked as a seal."

Though I laughed along with Michel, I was quaking at the thought of Henri's disaster.

Michel finally pulled himself together and went on with his story. "The captain didn't have the heart to lash the young fella. I wouldn't have either," he said, cackling. "Poor Henri has learned his lesson, I can tell you that. Course, he's lost his shore privileges, but I don't think he minds for now." Michel convulsed with laughter along with the rest of the kitchen crew.

"Poor Henri," Michel chortled, "he'll never live this one down. Donat already gave him his nickname: Barebutt."

"At least your Barebutt avoided the lash," said my master who had just come out of officer's quarters and was standing behind me. "It might've ended worse."

"True, true, sir," said Michel, wiping his watery eyes, as he abruptly stopped laughing. "Well, I best be gettin' back to work."

"And so must we," Commerson said, lifting his eyebrows and glancing at me.

I shouldered our boxes and tools and climbed the companionway to the deck. Michel's story weighed more heavily on me than our equipment. Henri's misadventure was my own worst nightmare. Fear of being abducted and disrobed often kept me awake or stalked me in my dreams.

Commerson spoke to Donat, who sent Romain to help us. Martin was far too sick to lend a hand. For those with scurvy, Captain de Bougainville had prescribed an island regimen of sunshine, fresh air, clean water, and tropical fruits. His men had set up a makeshift hospital not far from shore. I hoped that my friend's health would soon improve.

I loaded a canoe full of equipment and lowered it onto the lagoon with Romain's help. Once I'd settled my master, I paddled through turquoise waters along the edge of a reef. Bright-colored fish of every size and shape darted in and out of the coral. Sea birds soared overhead and chattered in flocks on shore. The sweet scent of tropical flowers filled my nostrils. After months at sea, our ship smelled like a giant outhouse, but my nose had grown numb. Now the island was reawakening my senses.

To all my shipmates, Tahiti was heaven on earth. But

for me alone, it felt like purgatory. My feelings for Commer-
son, which I'd been holding at bay (along with my craving
for food), had come surging back stronger than ever. I loved
each minute we spent together, but my pleasure was always
mixed with pain and guilt. I dreamed of moving back to
France with him at the end of the expedition and continu-
ing to help him with his work. I even imagined serving as
a surrogate mother to his son. But our differences seemed
like a yawning chasm that could never be bridged. And
even if they could somehow be spanned, he would never
forgive my deception. If nothing else, his vanity would be
fatally wounded when he learned the truth.

Secretly, I'd been using his Christian name since our
arrival in Tahiti. Though I would never dare to address him
that way, I couldn't stop thinking of my master as Philibert:
My dear, dear Philibert. My feelings had become so strong
that I often averted my eyes from him, fearing my face
would betray me.

My fear increased my misery, more so right now after
hearing about Henri's disaster. I could never let down my
guard, not even here in paradise.

Some paradise.

When we reached shore, Philibert picked up the
front of the canoe and helped me carry it onto the beach.
I allowed myself to gaze at him. He was athletic and agile
from years of hiking and climbing through harsh land-
scapes in search of plants. The sun had turned his com-
plexion a healthy bronze, not the awful ivory color that was
popular in Parisian society these days.

A moment after I pulled our equipment from the
canoe, I saw Prince Charles jogging up the shore. The
prince, who had saved my master's life in Montevideo

last October, enjoyed plant hunting. He had been a regular companion while we were landlocked in the Strait. Of course, we hadn't seen much of him during our South Pacific crossing aboard different ships. Today, he greeted Philibert warmly.

Prince Charles had a round face, kind brown eyes, and wavy, sun-bleached hair. At just over five feet, he had the stature of an average Frenchman. Despite his royal background, his kindness and generosity had won over everyone, myself included.

"Your timing is perfect," he said. "We're about to meet with Ereti, and De Bougainville wants you to join us."

Ereti was the chief of the island and father of the handsome young man who had come aboard the *Étoile*. It turned out that the Adonis was indeed a prince of the island, and the beautiful woman who had joined him on our ship was his wife, the princess.

Philibert smiled. "I'd be honored."

"Leave your equipment with Lavery," Prince Charles said, referring to one of De Bougainville's second lieutenants.

I lifted a box onto one shoulder and picked up the rest of the equipment. We followed Prince Charles to De Bougainville's longboats, about twenty meters up the shore, where our illustrious captain was waiting.

De Bougainville was dressed in formal attire: a blue jacket trimmed in gold, matching pants, and white vest. A black hat swept back over his powdered wig. Apparently he wished to make a strong impression for his host, Ereti. He had succeeded, as usual.

To my eye, Philibert did not seem diminished in his presence.

"Good morning, Commerson," the captain said.

"Good morning, indeed, sir."

At that moment, an island woman and her teenage daughter passed us. Like most women from Tahiti, they were shapely and beautiful. Their tunics, knotted at the shoulder, swooped low, exposing their breasts. Such attire was commonplace here, but would have been scandalous in any village of our kingdom.

The three Frenchmen stopped talking. Silly grins spread across their faces. They shook their heads in astonishment. The island women strolled down the beach. The men looked at one another and chuckled in embarrassment.

A moment later, an elegant Tahitian man emerged from a banana grove behind us. "That's Ereti," Prince Charles explained.

Broad-shouldered and imposing, Ereti stood eye to eye with our six-foot-tall captain. His beard and hair were oiled in the island style. He wore a turquoise loincloth. Behind the island chief, an entourage of several dozen men followed respectfully. "*Taio*," he welcomed De Bougainville, and his entourage echoed the greeting.

We followed Ereti into a grove of bananas, coconuts, and other exotic fruits. Philibert eyed the fruit trees, taking mental notes about every plant. Islanders waved at us from their thatched cottages at the edge of the grove and shouted their greetings: *Taio! Taio! Taio!*

More Tahitians joined the growing throng, as we passed into a field of potatoes and other ground roots. The handsome islanders glowed with health and contentment. Everyone seemed well proportioned and trim. Their shifts, skirts, and scarves matched Mother Nature's colors: blue, green, red, brown, gold, and violet.

Unfortunately, they shared the habit of touching our

clothes and inspecting our equipment at every chance. Their forwardness made me nervous. A boy grabbed my cap and raced away with it. Another young man seized my master's looking glass. If Prince Charles hadn't stopped him, he would have run off with it.

"He didn't show the least bit of shame when I caught him," Prince Charles said.

"Apparently they have a different attitude toward property than we do," Commerson said.

"In a nutshell, they believe what's ours we'll share and what's yours we'll take," Prince Charles said.

Finally, we arrived at Ereti's home. At eighty feet by forty feet, his residence was much larger than the huts along the way. The walls were made of bamboo, reeds, and thatch. Rafters supported giant leaves overhead. Woven mats carpeted the floor. The only furnishing was an altar with statues.

An older man, his arms crossed in displeasure, stood near the altar. Later, we learned that he was Ereti's father. An island legend had long foretold the arrival of giant ships without rudders. According to this tale, the ships would bring terrible misery in their wake, which explained his disapproval.

Ereti ushered Captain de Bougainville into his garden. Trees, flowers, grasses, and vines of many shapes and sizes filled the vast area. Ereti seated our entourage on mats in the middle of the garden. Overhead, birds sang a symphony. I let my guard down for a moment and drank in the spectacle in front of me.

Servants appeared with bowls of coconut milk and platters made of giant leaves, loaded with bananas, sweet potatoes, yams, native limes, roast pig and fish. My stomach growled in appreciation.

I was sitting under a tree a short distance from the captain's party. Servants offered me a mat and food. I ate a plant that had been baked like a potato and tasted like bread. The islanders also use parts of this "breadfruit" tree, we learned, to produce cloth and mats.

The feast and the setting had distracted me, so I didn't notice the four servant boys in a nearby tree. After a while, I heard their laughter and saw them gawking. My guard went instantly back up, as I thought of poor Henri and his ordeal. I stooped over and continued to eat, pretending to ignore the brats. But my fear was mounting, slowly killing my appetite and any enjoyment from the tasty meal.

When the meal mercifully ended, Captain de Bougainville ordered his lieutenants to bring out the chests. Ereti's servants turned their attention from me to our captain's trinkets. I moved closer—and away from the boys—to watch the proceedings.

The captain presented nails, tools, mirrors, beads, buttons, and fish hooks that native people usually coveted. In turn, Ereti's servants delivered casks of fruit, rolls of cloth, and island pigs to the captain. They also conveyed an elaborate collar of feathers and beads, which Ereti tied around our captain's neck. The proud chieftain seemed well aware that his gifts far outshined our captain's cheap baubles.

Perhaps in reaction, De Bougainville summoned Philibert to his side. He had an idea to recoup his honor and was counting on Philibert for help. "I want you to prepare a French garden near Ereti's home tomorrow," he told my master. A linguist from the *Boudeuse* attempted to translate with hand signals and a few words that he'd already figured out. Ereti nodded approval, apparently understanding the gist of it.

"It would be an honor," Philibert said. "I'll plant onions, potatoes, lettuce, and carrots. No doubt they'll prepare us a French stew on our next visit."

"I'd love to experience a French-Tahitian stew," Prince Charles declared.

Thanks to my Philibert, we would leave behind a valuable remembrance here when we bid farewell to Tahiti. I'd work by his side bringing a garden to fruition, and the islanders would benefit from our visit.

A flood of feelings washed through me: Pride mixed with shame, pleasure with misery, fear with wonder, and joy with sorrow. I felt like I was drowning.

And then Ereti clapped. Instantly, musicians appeared with wooden flutes, drums, and small stringed instruments. Women in long grass skirts and floral necklaces wove their way through the garden, singing, swaying, and shaking to the beat.

The boys who had gawked at me were now clearing away the remainders of our feast. Throughout the dance, they cast sidelong glances my way. When the music finally ended, De Bougainville and his party stood up, and I stepped beside Philibert.

"Our meeting was a success," he told Prince Charles.

"So far, so good," Prince Charles answered.

"You sound skeptical," Philibert said.

"There's too much room here for misunderstanding," the prince said. "Think of France and England, all of us Europeans, all essentially the same, and we have constant disagreements and endless wars. These people are so different from us. Our differences do not bode well."

"Would that we were more like them," Philibert said.

"We might not have so much conflict."

"Unfortunately, our admiration will do no one a bit of good."

Philibert nodded but didn't answer.

When we returned to shore, Philibert tossed his jacket on the ground and pulled off his shirt. I looked away from his bare torso, my heart pounding. "Thank heavens, the formalities are over," he said. "I thought I'd collapse from the heat."

He paused until I looked up. "What are you waiting for, Jean? You must be dying in that sweater."

"I don't feel the heat at all, sir," I lied. I was sweating buckets, but peeling a layer was impossible, for obvious reasons.

"Ah, yes, your malady," he said, "your very strange malady."

Fortunately, Philibert did not pursue the topic further. He was as anxious as me to begin the day's plant hunting. I picked up our equipment and followed him toward the hot, damp forest.

CHAPTER 28.

Tahiti

April 12, 1768

1 year, 7 weeks at sea

A week in Tahiti proved the perfect medicine for the health and morale of every *man* on ship, but worry had dampened my pleasure.

Today, my spirits lifted, as Martin was going on a plant hunt with Philibert and me. This would be the first time he felt well enough to join us since our arrival in Tahiti.

When we reached the island hospital, Martin was sitting under a palm tree. He stood up and lumbered our way. I smiled at the sight of my giant friend, vigorous and upright once more. He greeted my master before giving me a ferocious hug, which took away my breath.

"You seem to have your strength back," Philibert said laughing.

"I do, sir," Martin said. "And I'm raring to join you."

"Today you're the official Second Assistant to the Botanist," he said.

Martin beamed as if he'd just received the world's highest compliment. "Thank you, sir," he said.

"Onward!" Philibert said.

Martin lifted the strap of one box, slung it over his

shoulder, and grabbed a second. He was about to pick up a third, but I snatched it away. He looked fit and strong, but I didn't want him to overexert himself.

We started along the bank of the river toward the island's waterfall. As we passed a cluster of thatched cottages, islanders waved and shouted *Taio! Taio!* Per usual, a troupe of children followed. Unfortunately, they presented a problem: Like their parents, the island children were excellent thieves. We had to keep a constant eye on our equipment.

Just past a fruit grove, we heard water crashing. It sounded like a thousand steeds racing across the pampas. We reached a spot where the river cascaded down a cliff. Its sheer beauty stopped us in our tracks. Rainbows crisscrossed the plunging water. Leaves and blossoms fluttered from cracks in the rock wall. Colorful birds flashed through the mist.

And then a blast of firearms ripped through the air.

Nobody spoke for a moment. Even the children who'd followed us stopped their chattering. Only the beat of the waterfall broke the silence.

After several minutes, Philibert put down his bag. "False alarm," he said.

Martin grinned and we started opening boxes of equipment. And then shots rang out again.

Philibert shook his head. "We must go back. Our officers may need help."

In silence, we retraced our path along the river, past groves of coconut, banana, and lime. I thought about Magellan who'd been murdered by islanders in the South Pacific. What if De Bougainville and his officers had been ambushed?

As we neared the makeshift hospital, Commerson sighed with relief. "No major battles in progress," he said. "Thank heavens."

From a distance, the scene in front of the hospital appeared calm. Captain de Bougainville was conferring with Ereti. A group of officers and islanders huddled in a circle. Our fears seemed to be unfounded.

As we drew closer to the circle, a horrifying spectacle came into view. Blood-spattered corpses lay on the ground, and Frenchmen sat in irons nearby, among them my dear friend Rat. I knew from Martin that Rat always carried a knife. No doubt he'd played a part in this disaster. Rat scowled at me as I followed Philibert toward the officers. Maybe they'd keep him in irons and put him out of my misery.

I saw Denys, Captain de Bougainville's first mate. He greeted Philibert, and nodded at me. Once again, his attention caught me by surprise.

"The captain is meeting with Ereti now, trying to make amends," Denys explained. "No matter who's to blame, de Bougainville will have to display harsh discipline, just to calm the situation."

"Do you know what happened?" Philibert asked.

"We're trying to sort that out," Denys said. "Our men say the islanders tried to steal their tools, and the islanders claim our mates were pilfering. All we know for certain is that three Tahitians died from wounds inflicted by our men. Whatever brought it on, this is a calamity."

"The crew from Hades," Philibert muttered, as he turned toward me, shaking his head. I glanced at Rat who was still glaring our way. Had our officers taken away his knife?

"Watch our equipment, Baret," Philibert said. "I need to check in with Prince Charles to see if there's any way I can help."

"Yes, sir," I said.

Martin tapped me on the shoulder. "I'll ask around to see what's what."

Martin always got an accurate story faster than any officer could. No doubt, he'd learn the truth before Philibert did.

As soon as Martin left, more islanders arrived and joined the crowd wailing over the dead. It reminded me of the day the Fuegan boy had died. Misery seemed to follow our ship, hurting innocent people at every landing. I picked up our equipment, determined to get away from the carnage.

I made my way to the river, putting distance between me and the hospital. In a sunny spot, I dropped our equipment, formed a pillow in the sand, lay down, and closed my eyes. I forced all thoughts of the violent scene from my mind. The warm sand and sun, the salt air, the birds and flowers, and the drift of the river calmed me.

I dozed off, never sensing the islanders' approach. When I finally heard them giggling, they were about to pounce on our equipment. How could I stop them? No chance. There were six of them and one of me.

But they didn't touch our equipment.

They stepped past the boxes, seized me, and lifted me off the ground like a tiny canoe.

"*Evaine, evaine, evaine,*" they chanted. Girl, girl, girl.

These island men knew my secret.

I kicked and clawed, but six men were holding me tight and laughing at my distress.

Where were they taking me?

As they swung me in the air, my scarf loosened. My shirt was sliding up my chest. Soon my breasts would be poking out for the world to see. I thought of Henri, now known as Bare-butt by one and all. Surely they planned the same for me.

The men chattered and giggled. They tossed me in the air. A crowd of boys and girls paraded behind the men. "*Evaine, evaine, evaine,*" they all chanted.

Despite myself, I screamed.

The islanders only laughed louder.

What was I doing? I had to stay calm and think. Any sign of weakness would only encourage them.

The islanders carried me along the river before turning into a coconut grove. The boys and girls ran ahead, still chanting, "*Evaine, evaine, evaine.*"

I saw thatched cottages through the trees. My destiny opened in front of me like a gateway to hell. The men laughed and tossed me in the air.

I forced myself not to fight them but to think and to plan. Maybe I could slip away when they put me down.

But how?

I could grab something and fight them off —a loose piece of wood or a rock. I had to stay alert, pretend that I had given up, and look for a way out.

When we reached the cottages, villagers came to their doors to watch. The six men carried me toward a hut. As they moved closer, I prepared to claw, bite, kick, and fight to the bitter end.

And then I heard somebody shout an order to stop.

It was Martin. I've never felt more relieved to see anybody in my life. He raced toward us and jumped one of the

islanders, who fell to the ground. The Tahitians outnumbered Martin six to one, but he was twice their size. Martin pulled a huge club from his pant leg and hit one man on the shoulder. The others stood in a circle around him. He swung at another islander and hit him in the leg. The man howled, and the islanders ran off laughing and shouting: *Evaine, evaine, evaine.*

Martin helped me to my feet. "Are you hurt?" he asked.

I shook my head and tried to smile, but I was fighting tears.

Martin couldn't suppress a grin. "They just wanted to have some fun with you, like they did with Henri. They're no different from the men on our ship. They all enjoy their jokes on the young ones." He thumped me on the shoulder

"I thought I'd end up as Bare-butt Two," I said, somehow managing to control my trembling. I even grinned at my little joke.

Martin laughed. "Far as I know, there's still only one Bare-butt on our ship," he said. "Nobody needs to learn about this."

"Thanks, Martin."

"Don't mention it again, Professor. You saved my life once, and the secret stayed with you. I'm just returning the favor."

Martin had never before alluded to our run-in with the South American Indian or to my saving his life. I believed his promise: he would never say a word about this misadventure. But what if somebody from the expedition had trailed Martin or me? Would he spread the word? When I looked around, I didn't see anybody, yet I couldn't shake my unease.

"We better get back and collect the equipment before the master starts looking for us," Martin warned.

By the time we picked up our boxes and reached the hospital, the area had cleared out. The victims had been removed, every sign of the disaster washed away. The guilty Frenchmen had been carted off to the *Boudeuse* in manacles.

"Forgot to tell you," Martin said. "I found out what happened, and you won't be surprised. Damien—I mean, Rat—started the whole thing. He went after an islander's pig and when the man tried to stop him, Rat pulled his knife."

"But we heard gunshots."

"It only took a minute for the whole thing to blow up. The officers don't know it, but Rat got it going."

"Will you tell Lieutenant Caro?"

"Rat's a miserable excuse for a man, but I'm no squealer," Martin said. "Though I hear he is."

"So Rat informs on his mates?"

"That's the scuttlebutt, but who knows," Martin said. "Let's hope they keep him on the *Boudeuse*."

"Let's hope," I said.

I had big worries, even if Rat never came back to the *Étoile*. Had anybody seen me carried off? Martin had taken my abduction as a prank. What would my other mates say if they heard about it?

Just then, I saw Philibert talking to Denys, and my throat tightened. If it hadn't been for Martin, Philibert would already know the truth. He was a proud man, and my deceit would wound him. I felt guiltier than ever about my lies.

When Philibert spotted Martin and me, he waved us over. "I was just wondering what had become of you two," he said.

"We decided to get away from the mess here and look for plants," Martin answered. Then he turned to me and winked.

"Fine decision," my master said. "We won't have many more chances. Chief Ereti has ordered us to leave, and I don't blame him. Our men have caused the chief and his people a shipload of trouble. I'm afraid we'll soon bid farewell to the island of love."

Philibert was sorely disappointed, but I was relieved. During this grim morning, our sailors had murdered three Tahitians, and I'd been carried off by a group of island men. My latest calamity might end up jeopardizing my secret. The only good news of the day was our imminent departure—the sooner, the better.

CHAPTER 29.

Tahiti

April 15, 1768

1 year, 7 weeks at sea

Though the afternoon was dazzling, our crew seemed somber. Everybody was miserable about leaving Tahiti, everybody but me. With each passing day, my fears increased that Philibert would learn my secret. So, I welcomed our departure.

At the moment, we were on the quarterdeck, observing preparations on the deck below. Crewmen scraped the woodwork and painted rails. Others re-rigged spars, spliced lines, and tied knots. Carpenters were building a new pen to hold the island pigs. Deckhands filled every corner with crates of fruits and vegetables and stacks of raw wood. These supplies should help to stave off starvation and scurvy during the long Pacific voyage still ahead. Or so our captains hoped.

"Good morning, Commerson," said Midshipman Donat, as he rushed past us with Little Voltaire at his heels.

A longboat from the *Boudeuse* had just arrived, and Donat hurried to greet them. Captain De Bougainville boarded first, followed by three lieutenants and the handsome islander known as Aotourou. The island prince now

wore a scarlet jacket and a three-cornered hat. He looked oddly dashing in the attire of a French officer.

Aotourou strode toward the quarterdeck, conversing with one of De Bougainville's lieutenants. In South America, I'd overheard the ship's linguist communicating with the Indians. Today he was speaking casually in the lilting tongue of Tahiti.

This turn of events alarmed me. The islanders knew my secret, which meant Aotourou probably knew and could communicate this knowledge to our linguist. I slipped behind several officers to make myself as inconspicuous as possible.

But I couldn't hide my secret forever. I had to find the right time to tell Philibert before he learned about me from somebody else

Philibert greeted the captain in front of the officer's salon. "I trust that you've begun preparing for our departure," De Bougainville said, shaking Philibert's hand.

"Alas, I have" Philibert said.

De Bougainville sighed dramatically. "I would love to stay in Tahiti forever," he said. "Yet our troubles here worsen by the minute."

Philibert nodded. "We have many places to visit and no time for disaster."

"Exactly," De Bougainville said. "In the meanwhile, I need your help. I plan to incorporate your work on Tahiti into a general account of the island's geography, anthropology, and botany."

"I'd be pleased to contribute," the Botanist said. "And I shall have plenty of time to record my findings."

The captain nodded and glanced at his linguist and Aotourou. "As you can see, my lieutenant has learned

enough of the Tahitian language to communicate with Aotourou. We're developing a lexicon of Tahitian vocabulary, which I will add to my account, as well."

"Aotourou seems at home in French society," Philibert said. "He doesn't appear a bit intimidated by our officers."

"On the contrary," De Bougainville said, "I believe he feels superior."

"And perhaps he should," Philibert said laughing.

"I must say, he's as taken with us, as we are with Tahiti," the captain said. "He's told the lieutenant that he wishes to visit our island."

"Our island?"

"Aotourou believes that the kingdom of France is an island."

"From his perspective that makes perfect sense," Philibert said. "Islands are all Aotourou has ever known. How could he possibly conceive of vast continents like Europe and Asia?"

"He's quite taken with the idea of visiting the island of France," De Bougainville said. "It should be the experience of a lifetime."

"So you've decided to bring him along?"

"I've already prepared a cabin for him on the *Boudeuse*."

"I'm sure he'll learn a great deal," Philibert said.

"We can enlighten each other," De Bougainville said. "The Tahitians are excellent seamen. They travel long distances in their small boats. Aotourou can help us navigate the islands in this region."

I only hoped that Aotourou didn't enlighten everyone about me. Fortunately, he would be staying on the *Boudeuse*. If my luck held, he wouldn't think of me.

"Does Aotourou understand how long our voyage will last?" Philibert asked.

"The lieutenant has done his best to explain," De Bougainville said.

"Does he know that he may never see this beautiful island again?"

De Bougainville grimaced. "He will see Tahiti again," the captain said emphatically. "I'm committed to getting Aotourou back home after his journey to France. I've vowed to outfit a ship for that purpose when he's ready. For his part, Aotourou will travel to places that no islander has seen before — nor is likely to visit again. The way I see it, everyone benefits."

At that moment, Aotourou, showing perfect timing, turned to Captain de Bougainville, took off his three-cornered hat, and bowed. He seemed well aware that the captain and Philibert had been discussing him.

"You see, he's already learning good French manners," De Bougainville said, bowing in return.

And then Aotourou glanced my way. Though I had been on guard since his arrival, an officer had just stepped away and exposed me to Aotourou's view. A look of apparent recognition passed across the islander's face. I slipped behind some crates, as Philibert and De Bougainville continued their conversation. For now, I remained safely invisible.

But for how long? Aotourou had recognized me, I had no doubt. To make matters worse, the island prince was about to join the Bougainville Expedition.

My secret was in double jeopardy.

CHAPTER 30.

Leaving Tahiti

April 17, 1768

1 year, 8 weeks at sea

Two weeks after our arrival, the *Étoile* sailed at sunrise from the turquoise bay of Tahiti. Standing on the quarterdeck, I recalled the friendly welcome we'd received. The islanders had circled our ship in their outriggers and canoes. They'd greeted us with shouts of *Taio! Taio!*

Today, there was no parade of canoes; no warm farewells. The islanders ignored our departure. No doubt, they were pleased to see us go. During our short stay, we'd caused several deaths and disrupted the island's peace and tranquility.

I, too, was pleased. I looked forward to joining my mates on the kitchen crew this afternoon—and putting my misadventure behind me. With Aotourou aboard the *Boudeuse*, I felt hopeful that my secret was safe, at least for now.

Sitting on a wooden chest beside me, Philibert shook his head and sighed. "Say goodbye to the most beautiful spot on earth. No place will ever match this botanical heaven." He stood up, still shaking his head at this lost opportunity. "I'm off to review some calculations with poor Véron, who is quite overwhelmed with his longitudinal worries."

On the deck below, crewmen and officers were busy at their posts. I spotted Rat swabbing the deck. As it turned out, he'd spent little time aboard the *Boudeuse*. None of our officers had learned about Rat's part in the island disaster, and it seemed unlikely they ever would.

For the islanders' sake, De Bougainville had made a show of shackling and whipping the culprits. The midshipman held back with the cat-o'-nine-tails, and the captain released the murderers that same night. It was a monstrous injustice, but all hands were needed on deck if we were to return home safely.

Thin clouds drifted overhead. A brisk wind filled our sails, as the *Étoile* glided through sparkling waters. I leaned against a chest, closed my eyes, and listened to gentle swells lapping our hull. Lingering traces of island flowers perfumed the air.

I nearly drifted off to sleep before a rowdy tune interrupted my nap. I didn't catch the gist at first, only the words "fair young maiden." As the deckhands repeated their song a second time, my mind slowly grasped its meaning:

There was a fair young maiden,
Who craved a life so free,
She turned her back on home and hearth
To sail the seven seas.

And when the fair young maiden
Found her longed for chance,
She traded petticoats and frocks
For heavy boots and pants.

Once aboard the king's own ship,

She showed such modesty,
It led her mates to question
Why she never shaved at sea.

And lo! The fair young maiden
Kept such genteel company,
She never had to swab the head
Or scrub the pen at sea.

At length, upon the isle of love,
Her secret did unfold,
As island youths to the maiden,
Prepared to be so bold.

They know. My stomach turned to a lump of smoldering coal. A wave of nausea flooded over me. I took a deep breath, trying not to vomit. *I'm hearing things*, I told myself. This thought gave me a moment's comfort, before the truth crashed upon me again: *They know.* The burning in my stomach intensified, but I stayed put, trying to hide my distress. I did not wish to give these men any satisfaction or to confirm their suspicions. If I ignored them, they might think that their words meant nothing to me.

I counted to ten and then to twenty. I took a deep breath, stood up, and moved toward the companionway. From the corner of my eye, I saw Rat and his cohorts sneering and heard them begin their song again. Somehow, I kept my composure, never picking up my pace nor looking their way.

When I reached our cabin, I fumbled for my key. My hands shook as I maneuvered it into the keyhole and entered the empty room. I locked the door and flopped onto my cot, shaking like a man with plague.

Somehow Rat and his mates had learned about my misadventure. No doubt, they were eager to spread the rumor. My friends all knew that Rat hated me, so they might laugh the story off. Even so, a rumor could take on a life of its own and eventually reach Philibert.

What should I do?

I could tell Philibert about what happened in Tahiti in a joking way, compare it with Henri's misfortune, and hint about the vile rumor spread by my enemies. Most likely, he would laugh and tell me to ignore the crew from Hades.

Or, I could tell him the truth. It might be a relief to let my secret out.

Yes, I must tell Philibert—soon—but not today. The timing must be perfect.

For now, I would continue to throw myself into my work and prove my value. Before I revealed the truth, I had to figure out how to explain, to make Philibert understand.

Thus resolved, I opened a herbarium from Tahiti. I organized the plants and finished some sketches. Work proved to be the perfect tonic. My panic receded, and the pain in my stomach eased.

I was deep into my drawing when another distressing thought crossed my mind: I should hide my dress. What if somebody came snooping in our cabin and found my dress?

I stood up with a start, pulled out the drawer under my cot, and rummaged through it. The dress was gone. A cold chill passed through me, and I thought: *They already found my dress. That's how they know.* Another horrible idea hit me: *They found my journal.*

I got up to check the locked chest that Philibert had given me. My journal was still inside, under my paints and some canvas. Then I remembered that I'd hidden my dress at the bottom of the same chest. It was still there.

I sat down on the cot to catch my breath. I'd barely stopped shaking when Philibert entered the room. He closed the door but did not go to his desk. Our eyes met. He stared at me with an expression of alarm.

I braced for disaster.

"What's wrong, Jean?" he asked. "You look positively ashen. Are you sick again?"

In my confusion, I smiled uncertainly. "No sir, just a little tired."

"Well, it hasn't slowed you down, now has it?" he said, grinning. "I must say I've never known anyone with such motivation." He laughed. "Present company excluded, of course."

"Of course, sir, thank you." I took a deep breath of relief.

"It seems this is the perfect moment to broach a subject that has been on my mind."

I must've turned white again.

Philibert laughed. "You're awfully tense," he said. "I guess we're all upset about leaving Tahiti. Perhaps what I have to say will balance your disappointment." He grinned and cleared his throat.

"As it happens, I have been thinking about your many talents," he said, "in particular your teaching ability. I know that you've been teaching Martin how to read. I hear that you've begun to tutor your friend Romain, as well. I believe you would make an excellent tutor for my son Archambault, when we return to France. And, of course, you could continue to help me with my botanical pursuits after this voyage."

Surprise, pleasure, and relief took away my breath and my voice. I stared at Philibert in disbelief.

"Jean, what is the matter?" he asked. "Are you sure nothing's wrong? Are you sure you're not sick?"

"No, sir, nothing's wrong. I heard you, but I'm still trying to take it in."

"You didn't know I have a son?"

"I did know of your son, sir," I said. "However, your offer is so generous and so unexpected that it overwhelmed me, sir."

He shook his head and laughed. "Then you are interested in my offer?"

"Sir, I am entirely grateful for your offer. Thank you, sir. Thank you so much."

"Then it's settled." Philibert stepped away and sat down at his desk.

All these months, I'd dreamed of returning to France with Philibert. I'd imagined our life after the expedition filled with more adventure, excitement, learning, and, in time, even romance. I'd also hoped that one day I might serve as a mother to his son. Now my dreams seemed within reach. Indeed, Philibert desired my continued assistance and found me worthy of tutoring Archambault. Though I was pleased with his offer, I felt guilt for my deception and fear about getting caught.

I thought of that giant rock balanced on a pointed peak near the Strait of Magellan. It looked as though it had been suspended there for Eternity. But a fresh wind might blow it over in an instant. The memory brought home my current circumstances. I was that rock, poised on a peak, looking out upon the great Pacific, the whole world in front of me. Yet the winds were whipping about me, and my balance was precarious.

At any moment, I might come crashing down to earth.

CHAPTER 31.

South Pacific Ocean

May 27, 1768

1 year, 14 weeks at sea

When we left Tahiti, I had looked forward to joining my mates on kitchen crew. But something between us had changed. They all seemed stiff and didn't joke with me anymore. Sometimes I caught them looking me up and down. Or so I imagined. Maybe I'd become thin-skinned because of what had happened in Tahiti.

Today, my mess mates' main preoccupation was our food, or lack of it. After six weeks, our Tahitian supplies were already running low. "No good's going to come of it," Henri said. "We're all going to starve."

"What are you jabbering about?" Romain asked. "No good's going to come of what?"

"The captain's stupid search for a new continent," Henri said. "I been listening to the old salts. They all say it's a waste of time."

Henri's comment provoked me, as I'd been listening in on Philibert and Véron's conversation about this very topic. "The world's greatest scientists all agree with Captain De Bougainville," I said, feeling their eyes on me. "There's a huge continent in the South Seas. If we keep sailing west from here, we'll bump into it."

"You're still a big, know-it-all flower picker," Henri said. But he was staring at my chest, which caught me off guard.

"Bare-butt," I retorted.

Luckily, the men laughed at my joke. Henri brushed us off and went on: "The food's going to run out before we find any new continent. That's what the old salts—"

Shouting and commotion on deck interrupted Henri. We all raced up the companionway. Our ships had reached a small island with a long shoreline and a great forest. Many deckhands were watching at the bulwark, and preparations were underway to explore the island.

Donat directed some crewmen who were lowering a longboat and rope ladder down the side of the ship. Philibert stood nearby with several officers. Soon Lieutenant Caro descended the ladder and Philibert followed.

I mounted a barrel and watched our exploration party rowing toward the island. With my attention on Philibert, I didn't notice Rat's approach. "Man overboard," he whispered, shoving me and the barrel with one hard blow.

The barrel tipped sideways, and I tumbled over, grabbing the edge of the bulwark. I hung on, as ocean waves reached up and slapped me. At that moment, Gérard's frightened face flashed before me. Now I was looking death in the face. My tenuous grip was the only thing between me and the roiling sea.

I was losing hold when somebody grabbed my arm and pant leg and pulled me back onto the deck. "Thank you," I gasped, before falling down against the barrel, my head spinning.

Martin stooped down to check me out. "What happened, Professor?" he asked.

The answer caught in my throat.

"Rat," Martin said, spitting out the word like rotten grub. I nodded, yes.

"How many times have I warned you to watch out for him? Damien is a monster."

I didn't answer, and he didn't continue his lecture despite his obvious impatience and disappointment in me. Martin waited by my side, until I started to rise, and then he helped me back to my feet. "Better?" he asked.

I nodded. "Watch out for yourself," he said, before slipping away.

I stayed on deck to follow Philibert, but I couldn't stop shaking. Just then, Donat came up beside me. "How ya doin', Baret?" he asked, more friendly than usual.

When I tried to speak, vomit caught in my throat and I choked. Donat gave me an odd look before taking out his spyglass.

A comforting thought occurred to me: With the midshipman so near, I didn't have to worry about Rat. He wouldn't dare bother me now.

My relief was short-lived.

"Oh no," Donat said.

"What's wrong?"

He unhooked a second pair of spyglasses from his belt and passed them up to me. "Take a look."

"Thank you, sir."

A swarm of islanders were pouring out of the island's great forest and moving toward the beach, where four long-boats from the *Étoile* and *Boudeuse* had just landed. Our men pulled the boats onto the sand and unloaded equipment. I looked for Philibert but couldn't see him.

A knot tightened in my chest, as I thought of Magel-

lan. After surviving mutinies, food shortages, and scurvy, the great explorer had died at the hand of islanders in the South Pacific. Now, Philibert was on an island in the South Seas with hostile natives closing in.

"Our men are well armed, aren't they?" I asked Donat, trying to sound casual.

"They are," he answered, distractedly, almost to himself. "Unfortunately, De Bougainville only uses guns under dire circumstances. He believes our arms give us an unfair advantage."

For once, I regretted our captain's high-minded code.

I forced gory thoughts from my mind, as I searched for a sign of Philibert. The landing party reached a small stand of trees near shore. Some crewmen began sawing a large tree, while others stood guard with rifles poised. As soon as the tree fell to the ground, drumbeats filled the air. Through the spyglass, I could see islanders pushing in on our men.

And then I heard the retort of guns. The sound reached us a long second after we saw smoke from the rifle barrels. The effect was disturbing and cast a veil of unreality to the scene on shore, as if it were all a nightmare. Had anybody been hurt? I strained to see, but could only make out a crush of bodies as the drumbeats grew louder. "What's going on?" I asked.

"You're awful jumpy, Baret," Donat said impatiently.

I put the spyglasses back to my eyes.

Another blast of gunfire echoed across the water and I gasped. Donat looked at me and shook his head. "I told you, calm down, Baret," he said. "Your Royal Botanist is going to be fine. Don't worry."

Yet another round of gunfire blasted from shore, with

the same delayed, nightmarish effect. By now, everybody on deck was silent with fear—not just me. Half our officers were in the exploration party. What would happen to us if they *all* got murdered?

"Nobody's down yet," Donat said as if he'd read my mind.

Through the spyglasses, I watched our men stepping backward toward the longboats, their rifles trained on the islanders who were now shooting arrows. Though we needed timber, our party had left the fallen tree under a hail of missiles.

Finally our men reached the shoreline, lugged the longboats into the water, and scurried in. "Thank God," I blurted. "They made it"

At that moment, a group of islanders raced up the beach, pulled canoes from a pile of driftwood, and dragged them into the water. "De Bougainville should have been more aggressive," Donat declared.

I silently agreed.

The canoes glided toward our longboats. Within moments, the islanders were shooting at our men again. They released one wave of arrows after another until Captain De Bougainville signaled his men to shoot back. Under fire now, the islanders finally retreated.

"The boats are almost here," Donat said, "and I see your master."

Philibert sat at the back of the longboat, bent over, so I couldn't tell whether he was hurt. Within a minute, they reached the *Étoile*, and somebody shouted: "Don't worry, nobody's hurt."

Philibert looked up, waved, and grinned.

"Feel better now?" Donat asked, his words sounding like a taunt.

I shrugged indifferently, pretending not to notice his jeer. "Close call," I said.

"Close call," he agreed, "but everything turned out just fine."

Donat had no clue about my other close calls of the day. I was relieved that Philibert had survived his latest adventure. But Rat was bent on my destruction, and my secret was slipping out of my grasp. For me, everything was not just fine.

CHAPTER 32.

South Pacific Ocean

June 4, 1768

1 year, 15 weeks at sea

"Damn, damn, damn," Philibert muttered, as he rummaged through a chest next to his cot.

"Can I help you, sir?" I asked.

"I squirreled away some supplies, but I can't seem to find them."

"You mean those biscuits and fruits?" I replied.

"Yes," he answered hopefully.

"Those are long gone, sir."

Philibert's face fell.

"You shared them with me when we finished cataloguing your Tahitian collection," I said. "It was generous of you, sir."

He nodded glumly and muttered: "In retrospect, it seems more than generous." He sat at his desk, pushed through some drawers, swore again, stood up, and disappeared.

As the door closed, exhaustion and loneliness crept over me.

Of all my crewmates only Martin still treated me like a friend. I'm sure he'd heard the scuttlebutt, too, and he'd seen me carried off by the island men. Even so, nothing

had turned him. Martin was still like a big brother I could count on, no matter what.

I decided to pay him a visit. Maybe a change of scenery would settle my spirits. I grabbed a book, unlocked the door, and stepped into the hallway. Sailors were pumping on the gun deck. Michel was stirring a pot on the stove, Pockets by his side. Nobody bothered to look up.

"What's cooking?" I asked.

"You don't want to know," Michel said, shaking his head.

"No rat meat, I hope."

"Couldn't catch any," Michel said. "I'm too slow." He didn't smile. Michel's job was tough these days. Some crewmen acted as if our skimpy provisions were his fault.

"Have you seen Martin?" I asked.

"Sail-maker's storeroom."

I wove my way through empty crates crowding the gundeck and slipped inside the storeroom. Martin was patching a sail.

"I had some time on my hands, so I thought I'd bring you that book you wanted," I said.

He looked up and forced a smile. "I'll read it tonight," he said, "if I don't eat it first."

"This is Monsieur Commerson's book," I said. "If anybody gets to eat it, I do."

"Promise to save you half."

"I expect the *big* half," I said, handing him the book.

A small lantern flickered by Martin's side. The room was crammed from floor to ceiling with wood, tools, nails, and other supplies. I sat down on a coil of rope in front of the bench.

"So what do you think?" he asked, holding up a sail

he'd just repaired. His patch looked like a Tahitian flower, with bright stitches around the edge.

"You sew like a Parisian lace maker," I said.

Martin laughed. "I do it to keep my mind off food."

"That's all I think about," I said, lying.

"Hear about Voltaire?" he asked.

"The philosopher? Is he dead?" I asked half joking. I knew that Voltaire was an old man, but if our kingdom's most famous philosopher had died, nobody on ship would hear about it until we reached civilization.

Martin shook his head. "Not the philosopher," he said. "The Fuegan mutt. He's gone."

"Gone?"

"Few days back, Little Voltaire wandered away from Donat. Some boys caught him and ate him for dinner."

"Poor Donat," I said. "I bet Rat was in on it."

"The ringleader."

"Figures," I said, feeling queasy. "What did Donat do?"

"He caught them before they'd wolfed it all down. Donat was more upset about sharing the meat than losing his dog." Martin shrugged. "Got to admit every time I saw that little critter, I wondered how he'd taste with our rotten potatoes."

I couldn't imagine eating Bandit stew, but then again nobody had offered me any. When it came to food, we were all desperate, myself included.

"Well, I guess I should get going," I said, figuring I'd scout for Bandit on the supply deck. Lately, she'd been avoiding everybody, even Philibert and me. Maybe she was scared: smart cat. Maybe that's why she was still alive.

Before I stood up, Henri opened the door and poked in his head. "They've sighted land," he said. "Come quick."

Martin blew out his small lantern and we hurried after Henri. Our shipmates crowded the companionway.

"It's *Terra Australis*!" somebody shouted from the deck. "We've discovered the new continent."

"It's just wishful thinking," Henri said.

"Let's pray they're right," Romain said. "King Louis would reward us handsomely."

A few explorers had reported sighting the coast of *Terra Australis Incognita*, a new continent in the South Pacific. Thus far, no European ship had made a landing or staked a claim there, though many had searched for it.

From the bulwarks, we strained for a sign of land, as the *Étoile* sailed through a soupy mist. "I don't see a thing," Martin said. "Don't smell nothing, either, which means we're not near any continent."

Henri shook his head. "Like I been saying, the old salts are right," he said. "It's a fool's errand."

And then a sailor called from aloft: "Land ho!"

The men cheered and pressed against the bulwarks, hoping to spy a sign of land in the distance. But the clouds thickened and the mist changed to rain. Soon, their cheers turned to grumbling: another false alarm.

"I'm going back to the cabin," I told Martin wiping drizzle from my eyes.

The companionway was now crowded with disheartened crewmen whose hopes had been dashed once again. Everybody was returning to his post or retreating to the berthing deck. Michel was still at the stove on the gun deck.

"No luck," I said.

He looked up and smiled for the first time in days. "At least your master fared well," he replied mysteriously.

When I entered officers' quarters, I heard Philibert

whistling. Our cabin door was open, and the smell of fried meat wafted through the air. As I stepped inside, my mouth watered. "You're just in time for a feast," Philibert said, his olive eyes gleaming.

I gave him a puzzled look.

He picked up a pan, scraped half the contents onto a plate, and ate a spoonful. Then he closed his eyes and smiled contentedly. "Ummm," he said.

"Where'd you get it?" I asked.

"Take a guess," he said.

"Captain Giraudais opened his last storage closet?"

"No."

"Véron shared his stash?"

"No."

"You found a long-lost package?"

"No."

"I give up."

"You can't guess?" he asked, grinning.

I had one guess left that I dared not say: Bandit.

He waited a moment for my response, but I couldn't speak.

"I joined our friend Bandit down on the supply deck this morning," he said. "And I discovered that I'm quite a hunter myself."

"Sir?"

Philibert lifted the remains of two rats by the tails. "Michel was kind enough to lend me a dollop of fat and a frying pan. You may find this hard to believe, but fried rat tastes not unlike chicken," he said.

He ate another spoonful. "Care to join me?"

CHAPTER 33.

The Bay of New Britain

July 8, 1768

1 year, 20 weeks at sea

We sailed into the bay of New Britain at dawn. At last, we'd reached an island that was known to hold fruit, nuts, and fresh water but no hostile natives. Martin and I brought our gear onto the deck. Philibert waved to us from the bulwarks. When we reached him with our heavy load, he shook his head. "You've brought everything but my desk," he said.

"Sorry, sir," I answered. "We would have brought the desk, but it's nailed to the wall."

"I guess we'll have to make do without it," he said.

A thick fog settled over the bay. As we paddled toward shore, I made out our encampment, which the crew had set up early this morning. Some men lounged on the beach, while others bathed in the ocean. We drove the canoe onto the white sand, climbed out, and pulled it up. Martin and I carried everything to the campsite. Lieutenant Caro directed Philibert to a large tent, and Martin left for smaller quarters.

I dragged our boxes inside, took out our botanizing equipment, and piled the rest in a corner. When I stepped back outside, I bumped into a dark-skinned man. At first

glance, I took him for one of our mates from the Caribbean islands, but it was Aotourou, dressed in dark blue pants and a tan shirt. I shouldered my gear and hurried off, my head pounding with worry.

The first thing I saw after running into Aotourou was Philibert swatting a cloud of black insects. A swell of affection swept over me, followed by waves of shame and fear. Aotourou threatened my fulfilling life and any future with Philibert. Unlike my suspicious crewmates, Aotourou had the ear of Captain de Bougainville. I took a deep breath before stepping forward. I had to find a way to tell Philibert everything.

"The bugs are vicious," Philibert said

"They're eating me alive," Martin grumbled.

"Yet they don't seem to care for you, Baret," Philibert observed.

"I guess I'm not sweet enough," I said.

"Insects or no insects we have a task set out for us," Philibert said. "New Britain is known to have many fruit trees, and Captain De Bougainville has enlisted us to search for edible plants, as well as antiscorbutics."

"Sir?" I asked.

"Antiscorbutics— plants or plant parts that might alleviate scurvy. As of today there are fifty cases, I'm told."

"I just hope they aren't as sick as I was," Martin said, shaking his head. "I never felt so weak and miserable my whole life as I did with the scurvy." Martin gasped remembering his own suffering. "I thank my good stars I'm healthy again."

"It's the Tahitian bark you should thank," Philibert said. "I only wish I'd harvested a larger supply." Philibert had been giving Martin, Véron, and me a concoction

produced from the bark of a Tahitian tree to keep us scurvy-free. So far, it had worked.

We followed a creek into the dense forest. As we traveled inland, the insect swarms grew thicker. We buttoned our shirts to the top, pulled our caps over our ears, and tied kerchiefs over our mouths and noses.

"It's a sign," Martin said.

"What's a sign?" I asked.

"These black flies," Martin said.

"Of what?"

"Something bad is going to happen."

"Don't let the master hear you talking like that, Martin. You know superstitions make him angry."

"I'm feeling it strong today," Martin said. "I know something bad's going to happen. Swarms of black bugs always bring bad luck. I've heard that all my life."

"I never heard such a thing."

"Never?"

"No," I said. "I think you made it up." Martin scowled at me but didn't answer.

"Keep it to yourself, okay? It'll displease Monsieur Commerson."

"Okay," he said, not happy that I'd dismissed his fortunetelling.

I had to smile. Even Martin's old-fashioned superstitions held a kind of charm that linked me to my old life in France. I had no desire to go back there for now, but it was comforting to know that some things don't change.

After an hour, Martin discovered a cabbage-like plant that appeared to be edible. It was also crawling with ants. Another hour of digging produced only one small box of ant-covered cabbages.

"I don't understand why we haven't found any fruit trees," Philibert said. It's well documented that New Britain is rich in them." He sighed, shook his head, and added, "Assuming this is New Britain."

In recent days, we'd arrived in a part of the South Pacific that had been mapped by other explorers. Unfortunately, those maps were often faulty. Despite Véron's efforts to determine longitude, our whereabouts were uncertain. We never knew at any moment exactly where we'd been, where we were, or where we were headed.

"Most of the old timers say this isn't New Britain," Martin said.

"They may be right," Philibert said. "All we've got are some useless old maps and some new readings. According to the captain, we're getting close to civilization, but nobody's wagering money on it."

Martin picked up the box of cabbages. We slogged along the bank of a creek, tormented by heat and black flies. Finally, Philibert sat down and took off his shoes. "Let's wade into the creek," he said, stepping into the lukewarm water. "That should cool us down, and maybe the flies won't follow us."

As Martin and I dropped our boxes, a high-pitched barking pierced the air. "Voltaire," Martin and I exclaimed at the same instant. The barking sounded exactly like Midshipman Donat's poor Fuegan mutt who'd served as a hearty meal for some crewmen last month.

"Maybe Voltaire's ghost followed us," Martin suggested. "I've heard of animal spirits turning to ghosts."

"You're full of interesting yarns today, Martin," I said, shaking my hand to remind him not to share his latest vision with Philibert. "What's got into you? Why would Voltaire bother us? We didn't eat him."

"Maybe he's lookin' for company. Besides, if it's not Voltaire's ghost, what is it?"

As Martin and I waded into the creek toward Philibert, the barking drew closer. "Don't mention Voltaire's ghost to Monsieur Commerson, okay?" I said.

"Okay," he said, but his annoyance at my doubt seemed to be mounting with his fears.

A small flock of pigeons flew overhead. "Those birds sound like they came from the same litter as poor Voltaire," Martin said, laughing.

"Strange birds," I said, "very strange."

"Those birds bode well for us finding edible nuts and fruits," Philibert observed. "And look at this clam." He lifted a large, muddy clam from the creek. "Let's see what else the three of us can dredge up before we move on. I'm cooling down a bit, and the bugs aren't so vicious in the water. We might as well work here for now."

Our efforts at clamming proved futile. Though filthy and tired, I hadn't dug up a single clam. Philibert and Martin headed farther into the creek.

I was moving out of the water, when Martin shrieked. "Ahhhh, something bit me." He dragged himself toward the bank and collapsed beside me.

Philibert hurried after him. "Was it an insect or a snake?" he asked, helping Martin to sit up.

"A snake, sir," Martin whispered, his words already slurring. "It rubbed my ankle before it bit me." My friend was getting woozy. His head dropped onto his chest and his eyes turned glassy.

Philibert bent over to inspect the wound. "It must've been a snake. No insect leaves a mark like that," he said, producing a knife from his bag. He made a cut in the

wound and drained the poison before twisting a handkerchief tightly around Martin's leg, just above his ankle.

"We must leave everything this moment, Jean," Philibert said, turning to me. "We can return for the equipment later. I have some tonic for snake bite on ship. The sooner Martin gets it, the better."

"You could stay here with Martin, sir, and I could run back for the medicine and bring help."

"We can't let him lie down, even for a short while. It's best to keep him standing and moving. But we must hurry. Time is of the essence."

Martin was still huge, despite our starvation diet. Philibert hoisted one arm over his shoulder, I lifted the other, and we headed toward camp with Martin between us. It was like hauling a man and his wife together. Even so, the burden seemed strangely light. My will to save my friend must have boosted my strength. When I was girl, I'd heard stories about farmers who lifted wagons or carriages to rescue a family member. I was always suspicious about those tales. Yet here I was carrying this giant, as if he were light as a bag of apples.

I also felt amazing calm, a feeling in short supply these days. I knew we'd bring Martin to safety. My mind traveled back to my friend Jacques Jacain who had been attacked and murdered during an outing from the *Étoile*. I often wished I could have helped him, but I'd had no power to lend a hand. Today would be different. I wouldn't let Martin die.

My new-found confidence made me acknowledge my own good luck. Why did the snake bite Martin? Why not me? Why had Jacques and Gérard been murdered? Why not me? The gloomy feelings that had overwhelmed me

earlier today evaporated, as I carried my friend toward safety.

At that moment, I knew I would survive this voyage, no matter what came my way. I would become the first woman ever to sail around the world. It was meant to be. Against all odds, I'd made a new life as botanist's assistant, and I was on my way to becoming a true scientist. Against all odds, my masquerade was still safe, at least from the officers and scientists. I could still hope that Philibert would not learn about me until I figured out the perfect way to tell him myself. I could still hold onto the dream that one day he would understand, forgive me, and accept me as a trusted partner. In my secret heart, I still believed this was all meant to be.

I pushed on, bearing my friend with ease. In no time, I heard our sailors singing.

CHAPTER 34.

The Bay of New Britain

July 28, 1768

1 year, 22 weeks at sea

Three weeks of plant hunting on New Britain had produced little food. The lack of fresh fruit and the island's small size seemed to prove the old timers' claim that our maps and longitude were off target. This island was not New Britain, after all.

Even so, Captain de Bougainville extended our stop-over here to rest the crew and patch the ships. All the while, Philibert, Martin, and I continued our hapless search for edible plants. Martin had recovered quickly from the snakebite, thanks to my master's antidote.

I delivered to my messmates our only find of the day, another small box of cabbages. Many crewmen were still camping on the island, but we prepared most meals (if you could call them that) aboard ship.

Today Michel was nowhere in sight. Henri accepted my delivery with rolling eyes. "I suppose this batch is covered with black ants, too," he said.

"Better than nothing," I answered, dropping the box with a thud on his shoe.

"What are you doing?" Henri howled.

Romain laughed, and Henri shoved me, reverting to

his old ways. "Quit bellyaching," I said, shoving him back. "Beggars can't be choosers."

"I'll quit bellyaching after we leave this devil's island," Henri said.

"We'll be leaving New Britain soon enough," I said, returning to our earlier name.

"Haven't you figured out that this isn't New Britain, stupid?" Henri said. "De Bougainville and the Astronomer got the longitude wrong."

"Henri's right about that," Martin said, as he came up from the companionway.

"I know, I know," I said, wishing I hadn't slipped. "Anyhow, we'll be leaving here soon."

"And I'll be pleased to say goodbye," Martin said. He looked around the gun deck. "Anybody know where Michel went to?"

"He said he had some dirty work to take care of," Henri answered. "I think he's down on the supply deck."

Romain frowned and nodded in agreement.

"Don't tell me he's joined the rat hunters," I said.

Romain grunted and shook his head solemnly, but didn't utter a word.

"Some men love rat meat," Henri observed. "But I'm partial to leather. If you chew on a piece for a while, it tastes like beef. You should try it sometime."

"Better be careful where you find that delicacy," Martin said. "Lieutenant Caro says he'll lash any man caught stealing leather off a sail. The crewmen have eaten so many tongs, the lieutenant's afraid we'll lose half our sails in a storm."

"So, everybody must've enjoyed the latest batch of biscuits," I said. "They tasted like leather, and they were just as tough."

Henri laughed. "Michel told me he found those biscuits in a bucket along with a leather strap."

"You sure he served the biscuits and not the strap?" I asked.

On that note, I left my mates for our cabin. For once, they'd let me join in their banter again. It seemed I had regained some respect by helping to save Martin's life, no small feat given that he weighed as much as a young ox.

Back at the cabin, Philibert was sitting at his desk inspecting some plants. "You took the cabbages to Michel?" he asked.

"Michel wasn't around, so I left them with the kitchen crew. Everybody was thrilled with my delivery, especially with the an—,"

Before I finished my sentence, an enormous wave struck the *Étoile*. I went flying across the cabin, along with every loose box, book, instrument, paper, plant, and herbarium. Violent rocking continued to shake the ship for several minutes. As the pitching subsided, we stood up slowly.

I was face-to-face with Philibert when another giant wave hit. He plunged into me, and we both fell to the ground, landing in a pile of books, plants, and other debris.

A slat of wood pushed into my ribs, but I felt no pain—only Philibert's warm body. My heart traveled to my throat and brought tears to my eyes. Philibert seemed stunned by the accident, and he didn't budge. I knew he was fine, as I'd cushioned his fall.

For months, I'd dreamed of lying in Philibert's arms, and now his body was pressed tight against mine. My heart raced with pleasure and fear: Philibert might feel my breasts and hips and figure everything out. Before I could relish the moment, my fear had quashed my enjoyment.

Philibert rolled over, and he didn't look at me for a while. When I sat up, he asked: "Are you hurt, Baret?"

"I'm fine, sir," I whispered.

"Are you sure I didn't crush you?" he asked.

"No, you didn't hurt me at all." (If he only knew the truth. . .)

A brew of pleasure and fear rose in my chest and throat and made me gag. "What's wrong, Baret?" Philibert asked. "Are you sure you're okay?"

I cleared my throat. "I'm fine, sir."

"Then we'd better go on deck," he said. "We don't want to get trapped down here if more tremors hit."

"Tremors?" I asked.

"Yes, there must've been an earthquake in the vicinity," he said. "Great waves and dangerous tremors often follow an earthquake."

Philibert hadn't noticed anything when our bodies fell together, I surmised. The earthquake had captured his full attention.

We pushed through heaps of trash to the companion-way, and then climbed up to the quarterdeck holding tight to the ropes. The *Étoile* was still pitching and rocking.

On the deck below, the crew seemed dazed and scared. Loose sails and lines dangled from spars. Broken boxes and debris floated in pools of water and stacked up in piles. Some men picked up shattered crates and threw them overboard. Others furled sails and coiled lines speaking only in whispers. Officers scurried around trying to calm the crew and get the ship back in order.

On the quarterdeck, Lieutenant Caro was reporting to Captain Giraudais. "Donat just got back to me," he said. "Everybody's been accounted for. No major injuries, only some scratches and bruises."

Captain Giraudais smiled. "That's a relief," he said. "Any damage to the ship?"

"Everything important is still whole," the lieutenant answered. "The masts, the hull, the spars are all fine."

"We were lucky," Giraudais said.

"Very lucky," Lieutenant Caro agreed. "Once we clean up the mess, we'll be as good as new."

Then Caro bent close and whispered to the captain. I couldn't make out his words, but Giraudais shrugged, nodded, and finally grinned. A moment later, he stepped to the front of the quarterdeck with the lieutenant, who shook a bell for the crew's attention.

"That was my surprise for the day," the captain shouted, waving at the men. "I just wanted to wake everybody up."

The crew laughed uneasily, and somebody called back: "It worked, sir."

"Well, now that I have your attention," the captain went on, feigning nonchalance, "I should tell you that we were lucky. Earthquakes and the waves that accompany them are common in this part of the world. Some are monsters, but today's waves were only babies."

"Those were no babies, Captain," somebody shouted.

Captain Giraudais shrugged and smiled. "Believe me, they weren't monsters. Even so, we'll all tell our grandchildren about the colossal earthquake we survived. Right, men?"

"RIGHT, SIR!"

As the men shouted and cheered, an officer crossed the deck and whispered in the captain's ear.

"I have just heard some good news: Our ship is safe and sound, and all the crew is well—despite our monster quake."

There was more cheering.

"Unless, you know of unreported injuries, men."

"NO, SIR!" they hollered.

"We're all alive and kicking," somebody shouted.

"But we're starving to death," somebody else cried out.

"YES, YES, YES!!"

"Quiet, men, quiet," the captain said, raising his arms for silence. A smile brightened his face.

"But we're famished, sir!"

"Then be silent and listen." He waited until everyone had stopped whispering. "As it happens, I have more good news which should warm your hearts and fill your bellies, men. I have just learned that Michel is preparing a stew for dinner. When the ship is back in order we will have a feast."

I expected loud cheers, but the crew was silent.

The captain shrugged. "I suppose you know."

"Yes, sir," a voice called from the deck. "We heard."

"Yes, our dinner is Michel's goat, Pockets," he said.

"Yes, sir!" they all exclaimed.

I was stunned. I couldn't even imagine Michel butchering Pockets. That must have been the "dirty work" he was carrying out on the supply deck.

At that moment, Michel stepped from the companionway onto the deck, his teary eyes rimmed in red. As he walked toward the quarterdeck, the men cleared a path, and some mates patted his shoulder. When he reached the edge of the quarterdeck, he asked: "Can I say something to the crew, sir?"

The captain nodded, and Michel turned to face us. "I expect you to eat and eat hearty," he said. "Think of my Pockets when you do." He paused again. "And remember how she saved your worthless lives."

The men cheered, as Michel turned and walked back across the deck.

CHAPTER 35.

The Indian Ocean

September 1, 1768

One year, 26 weeks at sea

At last, we reached the Indian Ocean. But even this good news failed to cheer the crew. We hadn't eaten a decent meal since our goat stew more than a month ago, and that meal had left a bitter-sweet taste, at least for me. To make matters worse, half the crew now had scurvy.

"I just spoke with Vivez," Monsieur Véron reported. "Apparently, he doesn't have room in sickbay for all his new patients."

"De Bougainville will have us out of this mess soon," Philibert said.

Véron shook his head somberly. "According to Vivez, his patients won't survive another week."

"We'll reach civilization any day now," Philibert said. "I'm betting that Vivez's patients will all recover." Philibert's optimism, against all evidence to the contrary, surprised me but also gave me confidence.

Philibert opened a flask on his desk, poured amber liquid into three glasses, and passed one to Véron and me. "Drink this, Antoine," he said. "It will boost your body and lift your spirits. None of us should get discouraged and give

up now. We'll make a landing soon. You should know that better than anyone."

The Royal Astronomer nodded and obediently drank the potion. Philibert had been experimenting with various antiscorbutics since we'd left Tahiti. His efforts continued to pay off: Neither Philibert, Véron, Martin, nor I had suffered any symptoms of scurvy. Unfortunately, he had only small supplies of any given bark or plant, not nearly enough to treat the entire crew. The thought made me feel guilty, though not too much. I was grateful to be spared that debilitating scourge.

No sooner had I swigged the bitter medicine than a cannon blast interrupted the calm. "You see, Antoine, they've sighted land already, sooner than anyone expected," Philibert said, turning to Monsieur Véron again.

We hurried to the quarterdeck. No land was in sight, but a longboat from the *Boudeuse* was approaching the *Étoile*. Our crew crowded onto the deck. Donat dropped a rope ladder down the side of the ship. De Bougainville's officer climbed aboard, and Donat escorted him to the poop deck. Silence reigned and tension rose as we awaited word from our mother ship. When Lieutenant Caro emerged from the captain's quarters, his face was ashen. He seemed to be fighting back tears.

"The news must be terrible," Véron said.

"Perhaps we're off course, after all," Philibert said.

"That's not likely," Véron said. "De Bougainville's calculations matched mine exactly. His navigator took several reckonings, and I completed the lunars twice. We're definitely in the Indian Ocean, and in the vicinity of Boero."

Philibert shrugged and didn't reply, his optimism dampened by the lieutenant's morose expression.

Lieutenant Caro descended the companionway from the poop deck. He approached several officers, shaking his head sadly.

"What is it, sir?" a second lieutenant asked.

Caro's lips trembled. He took a deep breath. "It's Denys," he said somberly. "We've lost Denys." Our officers huddled in a circle, looking stricken by the loss of De Bougainville's first lieutenant.

The news shook me, as well. Though Denys was a first lieutenant and far above me in rank, he'd shown me kindness every time we met. I felt like I'd known him, and I admired his fine character. In South America, he'd spoken to me about his love of plants, a love that I shared. He even said he looked forward to reading about our botanical discoveries. The realization that he never would filled me with more sadness.

Lieutenant Caro moved on to speak with our crew. It must've been hard for him to carry on at time like this. Denys and he had come up together in the navy. Now he'd lost a close friend. I knew from hard experience the grief that came from such a loss.

"I'd heard that Denys was sick," Véron said. "But I had no idea it was so grave."

"After all these months at sea, and so near the end of our voyage," Philibert whispered. "If only he'd lasted a few more days."

Silence fell upon the deck as word of Denys's death spread. The news shook the *Étoile* like a tidal wave. On any ship, the first mate is next in line to the captain. He's responsible for the well-being of every crewman. A good first mate keeps an eye on the meanest men and fends for the weakest. He's the captain's eyes and ears and the mother

of his ship. Denys's death would leave a gaping hole in the heart of the *Boudeuse*.

Every man on the *Étoile* understood this and felt for their loss. The men whispered in small groups. Gloom and mumbled conversation replaced the usual laughter and gossip. Such is life at sea that any minute may bring momentous change. Misfortune and tragedy give way to triumph. Or peace and calm turn instantly to bereavement and disaster. And so it was on the afternoon of Denys's death.

Poor Denys was still a young man, just out of his twenties. Death often visited a sailor before his expected time, and it was never easy. But the loss of a first mate was a blow that we could hardly imagine. It made our own fate seem more precarious than ever. Sick bay was already overflowing. How many more men would die before we made land?

"Will there be a ceremony for Denys?" Philibert asked Lieutenant Caro, when he returned to the quarterdeck.

"Not until we land in Boero. We're too short-handed."

The lieutenant's final words reminded me to get moving. I was scheduled to join the cleanup crew on the next shift. First, I had to put away some loose herbaria and equipment. With a heavy heart, I descended the companionway to the gun deck. It was empty at the moment. The kitchen staff was on deck, commiserating with the rest of the crew. Nobody could believe the terrible news.

I walked from the companionway in the middle of the gun deck to the stove. As I stepped from the stove toward officers' quarters, my mind was on poor Denys and the friends I'd lost during our long voyage. Memories of Jacques' murder must have put my senses on alert. Something rustled behind the stove, and I shifted sideways as Rat charged me. His knife grazed my shoulder and clanked to the floor.

I reached for the knife, but Rat had already retrieved it. Before I could dash into officer's quarters, Rat pulled me down and sat on my chest, his knees pinning my shoulders. He pushed back my head with one hand and was about to cut my throat with the other. I grabbed his wrist and held back the knife. Slowly I pushed his arm away from me, tightening my grip until he released the knife. This time it clattered under the stove.

My own strength surprised me—perhaps a little too much. I must have let up for an instant, because Rat managed to shove down my head and knock me in the face. Seeing that I was stunned, he dragged me toward the sail-maker's workshop and dumped me onto a pile of sails. Before I could move, Rat was on top of me again, his hands around my throat.

"You and your friends all thought you were better than me," he growled through stinking breath, "but I got Jacques and you, and next I'll get Martin." He laughed, loud and mocking.

I pushed against Rat's chest and tried to kick him off, but he had a death hold on my wind pipe. I was already beginning to lose consciousness.

"You'll be seeing your friend soon," he said. "Say hi to Jacques for me." Again, he laughed in my face, his breath rotten as an old corpse.

As I struggled to breathe, dying thoughts crowded my mind:

How could this be happening? I was destined to circle the Earth. I was supposed to be the first woman to do it, the first woman ever. It was supposed to make me famous, to make Philibert care for me.

Now he'll learn about me in the worse possible way: He'll see my dead, naked body and know that I deceived him.

I was so sure, so sure of my destiny. I was going to be everything I was meant to be. I was going to do everything I was meant to do.

I was wrong. I was so wrong.

And then, through gauzy eyes, I saw Martin pulling Rat off me. "Get off, you barracuda . . ."

But Rat, always quick, had already picked up a sharp fid, the sail maker's spike. In one quick motion, Martin lifted him off me and threw him across the cabin. Rat shrieked when he landed, and I thought I heard him gurgling blood, like he was drowning, though I couldn't see him in the dark.

Then there was silence.

Martin bent down, his face inches from mine. I saw his look of worry as I slipped into unconsciousness.

I awakened briefly with a feeling of relief, until I saw Martin being pulled away from me and Lieutenant Caro directing three men to drag him off in shackles. I tried to protest that Martin had saved my life, but I couldn't speak: Rat had crushed my pipes. A moment later, I saw Lieutenant Caro staring at me with alarm as I lost consciousness again.

Am I dying?

I awakened to agonizing pain in my throat and neck and a pounding headache. A wave of fear jolted through me: *I'm dying of scurvy.*

"It looks like he's coming out of it," Philibert said, his voice close by.

"I think you're right," Lieutenant Caro answered.

"I was afraid I was going to lose him," Philibert said.

"We all thought he was a goner," the lieutenant said.

"He's a fighter," Philibert said, "and the hardest worker I've ever known."

"I don't know anybody else who could have kept up with you all these months," the lieutenant said.

I must have groaned at that moment, because they both leaned in, close to me. "He isn't out of danger yet, I'm afraid," Philibert said.

"His color is terrible," Lieutenant Caro said. "I've never seen anything like it. His skin is gray, but at least his breathing has improved."

"After the beating he took, it's remarkable he's breathing at all," Philibert said.

"Damien wasn't so lucky," the lieutenant added. "He's dead."

What did Lieutenant Caro mean? *Damien is dead*. And then I remembered my mortal fight with Rat.

Rat had tried to kill me. I wasn't dying of scurvy, after all. Our life-and-death struggle came back to me, and I almost cried out. But the pain in my voice box hurt so much that my cry sounded like a feeble moan, and I nearly passed out again.

"He's in terrible pain," Philibert said. "I can't get over the way Martin hurt the boy, especially after all Baret did for him."

"Damien warned me," Lieutenant Caro said. "I should have stopped Martin sooner, but you said they were friends."

The mention of Martin brought me back to my senses. Martin had saved me from Rat's clutches at the last moment. Yes, Martin had saved my life, and they'd taken him away in chains. My God, they'd taken away my friend, my friend who did nothing at all except save me from Rat,

and they thought it was Martin's fault. I opened my eyes and tried to tell them the truth. But the only sound coming from my broken voice box was a weak gurgling. And the pain was excruciating.

Philibert bent over me and grinned. "Look, his eyes are open," he said. "He's definitely waking up. He's going to be okay."

It seemed Philibert hadn't heard me or even realized that I was trying to communicate with him. I had to tell him about Martin, tell him that Martin had saved my life. I had to try again. Yet each time I enunciated a syllable of Martin's name, the effort felt like little knives jabbing my throat. My words came out like an infant's babble.

"I think he's trying to say something," Lieutenant Caro said.

I nodded, yes, yes. My mind was now alert though my voice was incapacitated. It seemed like Rat still held me in a death grip that kept me from telling the truth about him. I couldn't stop trying, even if the pain killed me. I couldn't let Rat get the last laugh on me—or Martin. I mumbled Martin's name again.

"He's saying 'Martin,' I believe," the lieutenant said.

Again, I nodded hopefully, emphatically: yes, yes.

Lieutenant Caro patted my arm. "Don't worry, son," he said. "Martin is in the brig. He'll never hurt another soul."

My God, it was maddening. They didn't understand at all. They were telling me they'd thrown Martin in the brig, and they believed it would console me. Of course, it only made me frantic for my friend and desperate to get him out. I shook my head. "Naoooo," I screeched, which caused me unbearable pain. I sounded like a crazed farm animal.

"I don't think he understood a word you said," Phi-

libert said. "He's making no sense at all. He must still be delirious." He felt my forehead. "Oh, no, his fever has spiked again."

The lieutenant sighed and shook his head. "It's no wonder after what he went through," he said. "Just look at his neck. It's so swollen you can hardly see where his shoulders begin."

"And he's sweating rivers," Philibert said. He felt my forehead again. "This fever concerns me. It wasn't so extreme until this moment."

"Let's take off his shirt and swab him down," the lieutenant said. "That might cool him off."

As they reached for my top, I clutched my arms across my chest and shivered to indicate that I was cold, not hot.

"Okay, okay, don't worry, Jean," Philibert said. Then he turned to the lieutenant and shrugged. "He's got an odd condition. He told me about it once: The boy gets chills when you'd expect a fever. We'll cover him up for now."

They spread a thin quilt over me, but the effort and frustration of trying to communicate was so overwhelming I slipped back into unconsciousness.

When I came to, Philibert was patting my forehead with a compress. My first reaction was terror: Had they taken off my shirt? (They hadn't.) My second was concern: I had to let them know that Martin had saved my life, not harmed me.

But my painful efforts still produced garbled sounds.

Philibert sat down by my cot with a bowl. "Here, drink this soup," he insisted. He must have prepared it while I was unconscious. "Drink it now, Jean. It will make you feel better." His words soothed me more than the small, warm spoonfuls of soup that followed.

"Don't worry, Baret," Lieutenant Caro said. "Martin is about to be whipped in front of the entire crew. It's a harsh punishment—two hundred lashes may kill him—but the man deserves it. He killed one mate today and almost killed another, his devoted teacher no less."

"Naoooo," I said. But again my garbled efforts only worried my master and the lieutenant and exhausted me to the point of unconsciousness again.

Luckily, I was only out for a moment.

Lieutenant Caro was still talking about Martin: "I knew Martin had a bad temper, but I thought he'd changed since he learned to read. It just goes to show you: Once a scoundrel always a scoundrel."

I shook my head vehemently and tried again to tell them, *no, no, no*, which only made them try harder to calm me down by elaborating endless details about Martin's impending punishment. "Don't worry, Jean. They'll be ringing the bells soon. Martin's been sitting in the brig, refusing to confess—saying it was Damien. And now he's just quiet, absolutely quiet. The insolence of that man is infuriating."

Just then, I heard the bells sounding on the deck. They were going to whip Martin, and probably kill him, if I couldn't communicate what had really happened. I had to try again. Maybe sitting upright would help. I forced myself onto my elbows, and then I took a deep breath.

Philibert and the lieutenant looked at me with horror. "What are you doing, boy?" the lieutenant asked. "You can't handle any exertion yet."

Philibert leaned over and tried to gently press me down onto my back, but I resisted. "Martin," I whispered.

Miraculously, my throat was not as raw as it had been.

My efforts to speak, along with Philibert's soup, must have warmed my pipes.

"Martin saved me," I said. Though my words were clear, they were faint, so faint, they were nearly inaudible.

A puzzled look crossed Lieutenant Caro's face. "I'm not sure," he said, "but I thought I heard him say 'Martin saved me.'"

I nodded and mouthed the words *yes, yes, yes*.

Philibert rushed to his desk, pulled out a sheet of paper and filled a quill with ink. Then he hurried back to my cot. I was so weak by now I could barely hold the pen. He placed a board on my lap. I scrawled: *Martin saved my life*. The thought crossed my mind that my writing wasn't legible.

And then I passed out again.

When I came to, Philibert, Lieutenant Caro, and Martin were standing over me. Martin smiled when I looked at him. He was disheveled but seemed unhurt. He must have escaped a whipping.

"Thank you, sir," I whispered, turning toward Caro. Though my words were still faint, I knew everybody could hear me, because they all grinned.

"Thank *you*, Baret," Lieutenant Caro said. He seemed troubled and distant and didn't say another word for a while.

Finally, he explained: "I've been vaguely aware that Damien might be a trouble-maker. I trusted him because he'd given me some useful information in the past, or so I thought. I assumed the gossip about Damien was just ill-feeling for the help he'd given me. I should have investigated." He shook his head regretfully. "My neglect almost cost you your life, Baret. We both have Martin to thank for how it worked out."

I smiled weakly and whispered: "Rat—Damien bragged that he killed Jacques."

"It just gets worse and worse," the lieutenant said. "I shouldn't have looked the other way when I heard rumors. I shouldn't have made assumptions that it was just resentment for his helping me. And I should have protected you and Jacques—that's part of my job. I'm sorry I didn't." Lieutenant Caro's concern heartened me and reminded me of poor Denys.

Philibert patted the lieutenant on the shoulder. "Jean will be fine, Martin's free, and the beast is dead and gone. That's what counts."

Caro shrugged and glanced at me again with a look of concern. He was not yet ready to absolve himself.

I nodded my agreement with Philibert, not only because my friend was free but also because I'd just learned something important: Lieutenant Caro's regret had just made me realize that it wasn't worth neglecting something that needed to be done. As soon as I was stronger, I would reveal everything to Philibert.

Philibert's words had made me feel hopeful, too: He had told the lieutenant to forgive himself for past mistakes. Soon, he might extend the same compassion to me.

CHAPTER 36.

Boero

September 12, 1768

One year, 28 weeks at sea

From the quarterdeck I watched the sun rise over the isle of Boero. Shades of peach and orange filled the sky. The sea reflected a fiery kaleidoscope. Yet the dazzling morning only dampened my low spirits.

Rat was gone from my life, and I was no longer starving. But worry and guilt overshadowed those happy changes, as I postponed my confession with one excuse after another.

During the past week, Philibert had never been more attentive. Though I relished his concern, I knew the longer I put off confessing, the worse it would go for me. I had thought about what to say and had even practiced my speech. Yet I had been unable to summon the courage to tell him. Until now.

I returned to our cabin, determined to explain everything. Philibert was sitting on the edge of his bed. "Good morning, sir," I said, affecting a cheerful air. "I hope you slept well."

"Better than I have in years," he answered. "There's nothing like a full belly to make me sleep like a baby." He yawned and rubbed his eyes. "It's a great relief to reach

civilization. In no time, we'll be back in France. Sadly—and happily—our adventure is almost over."

"I'm pleased to hear you slept well, sir," I said. "Because there's something I must tell you."

"I'm listening," he said.

My heart beat like a trapped bird as I stepped toward Philibert, set to reveal the truth.

Just then Lieutenant Caro knocked at our door. "Good morning, Lieutenant," Philibert said.

The lieutenant's appearance brought me instant relief: I was ready and willing to bare my soul and hope for Philibert's mercy. But I had been reprieved from my confession for a little longer.

"To what do we owe the honor of a visit so early in the day?" Philibert asked.

"Captain Giraudais asked me to call on you," he answered. "De Bougainville is in his cabin, and he wishes to see you."

"Then I'd best get moving, hadn't I?" Philibert said, standing up and tucking in his shirt.

"Yes, sir," Lieutenant Caro said, and then he turned to me. "How are you feeling, Baret?"

"Better every day, sir," I said. "Thank you." Lieutenant Caro's kindness again reminded me of poor Denys.

Philibert stepped toward the door. "Jean, please pack the equipment while I'm with Captain de Bougainville," he said. "As soon as I return, we'll head into Boero."

"I packed everything last night, sir."

"You are a wonder, Jean." As he walked through the doorway, the lieutenant followed close behind.

Philibert's compliment made me smile and bolstered my resolve: I would tell him the truth as soon as he

returned from his meeting with Captain de Bougainville. In the meantime, I had to do something to get my mind off the ordeal ahead. I hadn't opened my journal in weeks, and I had much news to report.

No sooner had I taken out the journal than I was interrupted by sharp knocking at our door. Much to my surprise, it was Lieutenant Caro again. "Collect yourself, Baret," he said. "You have been summoned to see the captain, too."

"Me?"

He nodded. A somber countenance had replaced his solicitous expression. He looked me over with fresh eyes, as if searching for the woman who had deluded him beneath a man's garments. *He knows.*

I put my pen and journal in the drawer under my bunk. With a growing sense of dread, I followed the lieutenant into the hallway like a condemned crewman on his way to a lashing. I heard laughter as we came onto the quarterdeck. Crewmen had lined up on the deck below, dozens of them staring at me and laughing. *They all know.*

My face and neck burned with shame as I trailed Lieutenant Caro up a second companionway from the quarterdeck to the poop deck. When we reached the landing, Philibert emerged from the captain's cabin, looking crushed and defeated. His face was pale, his lips curled into a tight frown. He slipped past me without uttering a word or glancing my way. My heart fell to my boots, and my gut filled with ice.

Lieutenant Caro knocked on the captain's door. "Come in," a stern voice ordered.

The lieutenant opened the door and stepped aside. As I entered the shadowy room, Caro whispered, "Brace yourself," before closing the door behind me.

To my left were a large chair and a grand armoire; in front of me, a thick bed with a purple-velvet spread. Paintings of great ships and harbors covered the walls. In the far right corner of the cabin was a large desk. A painting of our monarch and two flickering lanterns hung above it. In front of the desk sat a tall figure, his back to me.

The captain kept me standing by the door. I felt doomed beyond all hope and redemption.

Finally, he turned and stared at me across the cabin. In the light of two lanterns, I saw Captain Louis Antoine de Bougainville, the world-famous scientist, mathematical prodigy, aristocrat, warrior, explorer, leader of our expedition—and my hero.

"Come here," he ordered, his voice devoid of emotion.

As I passed the captain's plush bed, my boots hammered on the wooden floor, and my heart fluttered against my ribs. I stopped in front of the desk. My legs buckled, and I willed myself not to collapse.

"Sit," he ordered.

The blood raced from my head as I slipped gratefully into the chair. The captain stared at me with grim disdain. I averted my eyes to the desk, unable to look the illustrious captain in the face. His huge hands rested on the desktop. They were tan and muscular, more like a farmer's hands than a fine gentleman's, except for the heavy gold ring on his right hand.

"Do you know why I called you here?" he asked.

I swallowed hard, my throat throbbing. It felt like Rat's thumbs were still crushing my voice box. I couldn't speak.

The captain clenched his fist and rapped the desk.

I managed to look up and shake my head, *no*. Another in a long chain of lies.

Now it was De Bougainville's turn to shake his head. I had let him down one final time.

After a long moment, the captain spoke:

"I have heard rumors for some time, rumors which I chose to ignore, assuming them to be nothing more than idle gossip or the product of a small-minded grudge. At first it was a slow trickle of nasty jokes and tittle-tattle. In recent days, however, several officers came forward with their concerns. Even Aotourou communicated to me, in terms that could not be misunderstood, that *you are not a man*."

It was as if even he couldn't bring himself to say the truth: that I was a woman.

He leaned over his desk, looked into my eyes, and asked: "Is this true?"

Since leaving Rochefort, I had anticipated the day when my secret would be revealed. I had dreaded it and imagined it countless times in countless variations. Yet I had never dreamed of a personal encounter with the illustrious Captain de Bougainville. Fear, guilt, remorse and shame overwhelmed me. Tears filled my eyes and choked my throat. I tried to speak but no words came.

Then I wept. Like a girl.

I couldn't see Captain de Bougainville through my tears. I tried several times to calm myself and answer him, but I couldn't. The cabin was silent except for my sobs.

Finally, hearing my own sobs, I knew I had to compose myself, if only to save the last shred of my dignity. "Yes, sir, it is true. I am a woman."

The captain stared at me, without saying a word. He seemed to be waiting for me to explain myself.

During that brief pause, I pictured Philibert stepping

from this room, crushed and humiliated. The subsequent thought that my words might spare him further humiliation calmed and composed me. I answered Captain De Bougainville:

"Sir, I deceived the Royal Botanist from the very moment when the *Étoile* was about to sail from Rochefort. Monsieur Commerson was never privy to my secret. Nor does he know the true details of my past or the reasons for my deception. I have kept them to myself and maintained my masquerade all these months. He never knew one grain about my true story." With that a torrent of words erupted from me, as if bursting from some deep pool of grief, shame, and determination.

"The truth, sir, the truth that I hid from my master and from every soul on the *Étoile* is this: I am an orphan, sir. My father was an honest potter, who died suddenly two years ago. A lawsuit exhausted his estate and left me penniless. I had no prospects, no hope for a decent future. I was a woman alone in the world, miserable and desperate. My only choice seemed like a long prison sentence with no tolerable conclusion.

"Then I saw my master's notice for a botanist's assistant. I had read about your expedition and had always dreamed of adventure. It seemed the logical answer to my predicament. I couldn't resist: I carried out my plan with little forethought and no consideration of the consequences.

"I wanted only to become the first woman ever to sail around the Earth. So, I embarked upon a course which has brought me to this cabin, sir."

The captain was silent and his expression remained stern. I gazed at the desk again, awaiting his judgment. To distract myself, I studied each item on the desk: The cap-

tain's journal, bound in leather, an hourglass that had just run its course, a bronze sextant, a stack of books.

Captain de Bougainville turned over the hourglass. Then he cleared his throat.

"Mademoiselle Baret," he said. "I appreciate your longing to achieve something that others have failed to accomplish, never tried or even considered. But I cannot condone your deception. It has compromised your master and yourself. No matter how innocent he may be, there is now a cloud over Monsieur Commerson's reputation. Others will snicker at the master who took you in, showed you a whole new world, and trusted you. Your actions have given currency to the rumor that Philibert Commerson was your secret lover and in on your deception all along. I didn't believe it before, and I don't believe it now, but the rumor will always trail him.

"Beyond that, your actions put my expedition in jeopardy. You know very well how superstitious sailors can be. Some men still believe that a woman aboard ship is a Jonah who will bring on disaster. Had you been found out in the Strait or in the South Pacific, the men might have risen up in mutiny. Until recently we faced the twin threats of scurvy and starvation. Had your secret been revealed earlier, it might have been the spark that ignited chaos. The men might have thrown you off the ship or left you in Tahiti—or worse.

"Thank God it never came to that. What might have happened to you—and to all of us?"

The captain shuddered, then stopped and regarded me, as if he expected me to answer. An irresistible urge to defend myself—and perhaps help Philibert—welled up inside me and spilled out. "Yes, sir, thank God it did not

come to that. There was no mutiny, and your expedition has been a success. I know that my part has been minor, but I've worked my heart out for my master and for your expedition, and I know that I've done well."

The great captain crossed his arms, and I stopped speaking. His eyes were still on me and he shook his head, though he never responded to my defense. Finally, he cleared his throat and spoke:

"As for the remainder of our voyage: I have arranged for you to move into a private cabin in officers' quarters. For your safety and for the sake of propriety, you will stop mingling with our crewmen. Lieutenant Caro will oversee your confinement. I expect that you will behave with utmost modesty as long as you are still a member of my expedition." He paused and took a deep breath. "Now take a moment to compose yourself before you leave."

An odd mixture of shame and resolve coursed through me as I prepared to face my master and the crew.

As I stepped from the captain's shadowy cabin into the glaring sunlight, I heard seagulls cawing. Despite the heat, I was shivering. Lieutenant Caro stood outside the captain's door. "Keep your head down, and ignore everyone," he said. "Ignore everyone."

Hecklers crowded the deck below and pushed up against the quarterdeck. Some men whistled at me, while others sang the sea chantey about the fair young maiden. Still others curtsied as I followed the lieutenant across the quarterdeck and down the companionway. Though I never looked up, I wondered whether my old messmates were taunting me, too.

I followed Lieutenant Caro down the companionway. My walk of shame was complete. In the hallway, the lieu-

tenant stopped at the second door. "The worst is over," he said turning to me. "If your secret had gotten out before, it could have been disastrous for all of us. But now it's over."

He took a deep breath. "For what it's worth, I think you're the bravest person I ever met. Not only that, but you've been a force for good on this ship. You've taught Martin to read, Romain is learning, and they're both better men for it." He allowed a small smile to crease his lips. "You're going to be fine, Baret."

Caro's reassuring words briefly warmed me. But exposure had left me feeling naked and ashamed.

The lieutenant opened the door, and I stepped past him into my new cabin. It was tiny, with a hanging bunk, a bench, and one shelf. My bag lay on the bunk. Bandit had curled up in a ball on top of it. When I sat down, she stood, stretched, and then nestled on my lap. I wondered whether Philibert knew Bandit was here.

A rush of sadness washed over me at the thought of my lost dreams. Philibert would never forgive me. He'd given me opportunity, support, even affection. In return, I'd betrayed him. The help I'd given would pale next to the hurt I'd produced. I'd been so blinded by my own longing to see the world—and learn botany—that I'd postponed my confession until it was too late. My deception would be a humiliating blow to his pride. It would also produce a cloud of suspicion over him, though he was entirely innocent.

Yes, I would be the first woman to circle the Earth, but it would be a hollow triumph. All that I'd learned and seen would turn out to be nothing more than an adventurous detour, a mere side show that would soon bring me back to the dreary existence of my former life. Only it would be worse than ever, because I'd always be judging my dull existence against the life I might have had.

My dream of living with Philibert, sharing his work, staying by his side, perhaps even becoming his dearest companion, had vanished. How could I ever hope to regain his trust or to realize the farfetched idea of him caring for me? No doubt he now regretted ever meeting me. I thought about the day I first saw him in Rochefort, twenty-one months ago. It seemed like twenty-one years, a lifetime for me.

That same day, I'd also lied to my Aunt Jackie, gone against her wishes, and insulted her friend. Would she forgive me and welcome me back, despite everything? When she learned what happened here, she would likely be mortified. I had cast dishonor not only on myself but also on my father's and mother's families. She might disown and abandon me.

I rummaged through my bag and pulled out the blouse Aunt Jackie had given me, the one with red and yellow flowers embroidered on the sleeves. I ran my fingers over the flowers. At least I didn't have to pretend to be a boy anymore.

I locked my cabin door and pulled off my woolen shirt and thin cotton undershirt. They were threadbare and dirty. When I packed them in Rochefort, they still had my father's scent. Now they smelled like me.

I gazed at the scarf that had bound my breasts these many months. Slowly, I unwound it. It was like peeling off my own flesh. The scarf had given me security and comfort. It had guarded me from scrutiny. It had granted me a new identity.

I let it fall to the floor. All these months, I had looked at my breasts only once. Now I stared at them for a long time. It seemed like they belonged to someone else. It would take

a while to get used to my old body. I slipped on the blouse and felt womanly for the first time in nearly two years. It was a relief to be myself again.

I pictured that giant rock sitting precariously on a peak at the exit of the Strait, and I thought about how that image kept coming back to me. Now I understood: the rock was my secret, my dangerous secret, which might come crashing down anytime. Well, it *had* crashed, and the impact had devastated everything. My secret had damaged my master's reputation, destroyed mine, and dashed my dearest dreams. My goal of becoming the first woman to circle the Earth was still in sight, but now it felt empty. My dream of becoming Philibert's cherished colleague had been demolished in the avalanche.

Even so, I felt relieved, more relieved than I'd ever felt. I never had to worry again about getting caught. The masquerade that had caused me fear, worry, regret and shame had come to an end.

I started to laugh, and then I couldn't stop. I laughed until I cried, and soon I was sobbing and laughing uncontrollably. Waves of sadness, grief, guilt, loss, and, finally, blessed relief washed over me.

CHAPTER 37.

Java

September 21, 1768

One year, 30 weeks at sea

Our expedition had reached the Dutch isle of Java on the edge of the Indian Ocean. I no longer helped Philibert with his work. Martin alone accompanied him on stop-overs. I missed my work more than anything.

Lieutenant Caro had put me in charge of officers' meals after my meeting with Captain De Bougainville two weeks ago. My new responsibilities included setting up the officers' salon, preparing food, serving it, and cleaning up after the meal. The officers treated me with detachment or ignored me, though I sometimes caught their smirks and whispered jokes. It all seemed like a window on the servant's life I would soon return to, assuming my aunt forgave me and took me back.

But the worst part of my new duties came after the meal.

When I finished washing breakfast pans in the officer's galley, I had to return them to the mess crew. My old chums now shunned me.

"The officers paid you high compliments today," I said, trying to engage Michel as I handed him the pans.

Michel only barked, "Good for them."

I caught Henri casting me a sad look. Michel and Henri hadn't gotten over the news of my deception. Whatever suspicions they may have harbored before, they now seemed personally disappointed, as if my masquerade had been intended to make them look like fools.

On top of losing Philibert and the work I loved, I'd lost my old friends. Lieutenant Caro was the only person on ship who had treated me with kindness since my meeting with Captain De Bougainville. Martin and I hadn't crossed paths all week.

Some deck hands were polishing the cannon near the stove in preparation for our landing in Batavia, Java's main port. As I passed the men, I caught their leering, which made my flesh crawl. I felt for the knife in my pocket and hurried back to officer's quarters.

Now that I'd finished with mess duty for the morning, I changed into my flowered blouse and leather slippers. I let down my hair, which had been growing out slowly. I dressed like a woman and enjoyed being myself when I was alone, though I hadn't got up the courage to wear this attire around the ship.

After dressing, I opened my door. It became so stifling in my cabin that I kept it ajar during the day. I hung a thin cloth over the opening for privacy.

A moment later, Lieutenant Caro called from the doorway. "Cheer up. You have a visitor."

My heart pounded at the thought that it might be Philibert. I came to the doorway and pinned the cloth over the opening. Martin stood behind Caro. He had combed his scruffy hair and beard. He even wore a fresh shirt—or, perhaps, that was my imagination.

We stared at each other for a long moment. Martin was shivering, despite the heat. This was the first time we'd met since my discovery. I guess my huge friend was as nervous as I was. I wondered what he thought about seeing me in this flowery shirt.

Martin blushed and stammered. "Pr-, Pr-, Pr- , Pr- . . ."

He looked so silly, that I felt an urge to laugh. I tried to stifle it, but my laughter exploded from me. Soon Martin joined in, and even Caro allowed himself a small smile. It felt good to laugh for a change, and it put us all at ease.

Finally, Lieutenant Caro spoke. "You can visit together but the door must remain completely open," he said. "I'll be back soon." The lieutenant's comment made me feel odd, even queasy, as if I were a prisoner in a dungeon being granted a visitor.

Before he stepped into my cabin, Martin held out a bucket of water. "It rained last night, Professor," he said. "I caught a pail full, so you could clean up."

"Thank you, Martin," I said. "That was thoughtful."

Martin nodded and handed me a bundle of canvas secured with rope. "I been looking out for a torn sail," he said. "I know you like canvas for your painting. This should keep you busy for a while. I know you must be bored, since you're used to plenty of excitement."

"Come on in," I said, thinking how well my friend knew me. He understood what I needed and why without my saying a word. He sat on my bench, gazing at his hands. When he looked up at me again, he smiled shyly.

For some reason, a question popped into my head: "Did you ever guess?"

Martin shrugged. "Times I wondered," he said, "but

I never knew for sure. Didn't matter to me anyway, if you were boy, girl, or whatever.

"You saved my worthless life. Then you saved it again when you taught me to read. You're the closest thing to family I got in this lonely world. Anybody said anything around me, I shut them up fast. Told Rat you were twice the man he was—and I meant it."

"Still do," he added with a blush

We both laughed.

"We've been through a lot together, haven't we?" I said.

Martin nodded but didn't say anything. There was a moment of awkward silence.

"I see the guys every day, but they hardly talk to me," I said.

Martin grinned. "Well, you gave them plenty to talk about. They're still kind of hurt and embarrassed. Course, Henri says he knew all along."

"Henri would say that."

"He says he believed the rumors in Tahiti."

"So there were rumors?" I asked.

Martin nodded and shrugged. "Now, Henri says he's going to propose to you before you leave, says he wants to make you an honest woman."

"He's not up to that," I said.

"That's just what I told him, but he's going to do it anyway. It's his idea of turning the tables on you."

"Tell him not to bother, Martin. My heart's already taken."

Martin nodded again: I didn't need to explain my grim joke. He already knew what I meant.

"So you've been helping out Monsieur Commerson," I said.

"Yes, I've been his beast of burden."

"I suppose he's been teaching you how to press plants and organize his herbarium," I said, wanting to ask Martin so much more:

Does he seem to be suffering?

Has he mentioned my name?

Does he miss my help?

What are his plans?

To the only question I dared to say aloud—whether Philibert had taught him to press plants—Martin shook his head, no. "I'm sure he misses your help. I know I'm no replacement."

Those were the words I'd wanted to hear, though they offered me no real solace. They only made me miss my work more than ever. Martin and I stood in silence again, neither of us quite ready to venture on.

Luckily, Caro arrived at my door breaking the silence between Martin and me. "The sail master needs your help, Martin," Caro said.

Martin nodded and took my hand in both of his. "Be by again soon," he said.

As Martin and Caro turned away, I knew I had to get answers to my questions. I couldn't leave the *Étoile* without speaking to Philibert. I had to figure out some way to find an opening.

CHAPTER 38.

Batavia, Isle of Java

October 1, 1768

One year, 31 weeks at sea

The *Étoile* and *Boudeuse* had finally anchored at the port of Batavia, one week after our first landing on Java. Ships from every kingdom of Europe filled the great harbor of this important Dutch trading center. The Bougainville Expedition was winding to a close. And so was the time to summon my courage and seek out Philibert.

For me, our return to civilization meant uncertainty at best. Before long, I would see my aunt's family after a separation of two years. Even if they took me in, I would be returning to a future that promised to be dull, if not meaningless. And my parting from Philibert would be final, unless I could somehow reach him.

Today, Lieutenant Caro had given me permission to visit Batavia with Martin. I'd been stuck on ship, mostly in my cabin, since my unmasking by Captain De Bougainville six weeks ago. A trip to town would relieve my cabin fever, if only for the morning.

At 7:00 am, the lieutenant escorted me to the bulwark. The temperature was already sweltering. By noon it would be unbearable. I was wearing my flowered blouse with an undershirt, and my hair was down. No reason to hide the

truth. I was a woman, after all, and everybody knew it. I would wear whatever I pleased.

Crewmen were eating their breakfast of biscuits and fruit on deck. As I followed Caro down the short companionway from the quarterdeck, heads turned to stare more in wonder, it seemed, than derision. My disguise had been lifted and now they could behold the woman I was. In any event, those who might have taunted me hesitated with the lieutenant by my side. Otherwise their ridicule, I was certain, would have been unrelenting.

Martin was standing by the bulwark. He raced over as soon as he spotted me. "You will see Mademoiselle to the canoe?" Caro asked.

"Yes, sir."

Martin stood protectively by my side, while we waited for a crewman to lower our canoe. A slight breeze wafted through the humid air. Hazy clouds filtered the yellow morning light. I heard snickering and soft laughter behind us, and then some mates started singing their sea chantey. Growling, Martin turned, grabbed an oar from the bulwark, and held it with menace. That was enough to stop them.

"You climb down first," he said, still facing the crew.

I slipped to the front of the canoe, and Martin settled into the back. "I got everything planned," he said. "Learned the ropes during my first visit to Batavia. You don't need to worry about nothing." Martin, I knew, had taken my place on outings with Philibert. This reminder of my loss gave me a pang of sadness and jealousy.

As we canoed toward Batavia, memories of our happy plant-hunting trips washed over me. I thought of the first time we'd rowed together on the River Platte, the same day

I said goodbye to Jacques Jacain for the last time. He'd been gone for nearly two years, but his passing still stung.

Near the coast of Java, we saw soldiers guarding loads of sugar, rice, tea, arrah, coffee — and spices, spices, spices. A pungent cloud of cloves, nutmeg, and cinnamon filled the air. We pulled the canoe onto the wharf and left it with a crewmate watching other longboats.

At the wharf, Dutchmen, Chinese men, and native men in bright-colored skirts passed us, but no women—except for me. The port was mostly a man's world in European cities and colonies. As passersby glanced my way, I realized that I shouldn't have worn my flowered shirt, after all.

A crowd of officers stood in a circle up the pier. I thought I saw Philibert speaking with a stranger in a gray uniform, though I knew it was probably just my imagination.

From the harbor, we traveled along a canal up brick footpaths that bordered the wide, unpaved streets of Batavia. The walkways were neat and tidy. Large, elegant homes stood on lawns along the street. "I guess all the richest merchants live close to town," I said.

"Not from what I heard," Martin said. "All the rich ones moved away. Fact, your master stayed with one of them."

The mention of Philibert made my heart race. I wondered whether he was still on Java. Maybe that was him at the pier, after all. "So Monsieur Commerson is relaxing at an estate?" I asked as nonchalantly as I could. I wanted to know much more, but I felt embarrassed to ask directly.

"No, he's too busy for that," Martin said tersely. Maybe he was embarrassed, as well.

"So he's working too hard?" I asked.

"Always does," Martin answered.

This exchange brought a lump to my throat. I still felt guilty about deceiving Martin, and it brought back my shame for the trouble I'd caused Philibert.

"So why'd the merchants leave homes like these, so close to shore?" I asked, changing the subject.

"Pestilence; it hit the town hard. The ones who were rich enough left Batavia for the countryside."

"I should have guessed," I said. In Europe the same thing happened whenever an epidemic struck: Royals and wealthy merchants abandoned their city homes for the healthier air of the countryside.

We continued down the walkways toward a nearby emporium. Palm trees along the paths provided scant shade from the blazing sunlight. Already the air hung hot and heavy. In the distance we saw a walled compound with long orange-roofed buildings.

"Is that the castle?" I asked. I'd heard the so-called castle served as headquarters of the Dutch East India Company, a powerful trading company known as the VOC.

"Yeah, that's it," Martin said. "Some big wigs live there now. The old timers say it was destroyed a few years back."

"An uprising?" I asked, thinking the islanders must have rebelled.

Martin shook his head, no. "An earthquake, one of the worst, at least that's what they say. The land groans and rumbles under your feet and rolls like the highest swells in the ocean, until it seems like, like . . . like the end of the world."

I recalled our quake in New Ireland, which Captain Giraudais called a baby tremor. My throat tightened at the memory of it. To my mind, it was a perfect quake, just strong enough to let me fall into Philibert's arms.

"Hope they don't have one while we're here," Mar-

tin said. "Course, you never know. They come from the blue here all the time, no telling when. Then again, some people say—"

Martin hesitated and looked down at his feet with a smirk on his face.

"Some people say what?" I asked.

Martin looked up at me, smiled playfully, and said: "They say animals act strange before a quake. Serpents come out of their holes and rats start eatin' their tails."

Martin laughed and shook his head. "Don't worry. I won't say that to the master." He grinned, and then hesitated, mistaking my pained expression for a reprimand. "Superstitions, I know," he said.

I ignored his reaction and turned my attention to a fire in the distance. A thick perfume of cloves, cinnamon and pepper filled the air. "Are they burning spices?"

"VOC always burns their surpluses."

"That's like burning gold," I said.

"They'd rather burn it than sell it cheap," Martin said.

"I can't imagine wasting a crop. I guess that's what keeps the rich rich – and that's why I'll always be poor."

Martin and I both had a good laugh which put me at ease.

As we neared the pavilion, the pathways filled up with merchants, seamen, and travelers. Some traveled on foot carrying bundles. Some pushed carts, and others rode horses or oxen. The crowd separated for a procession of wealthy men and women. Slaves followed close by, holding parasols to shield their masters from the harsh sunlight. Luxurious carriages filled the street.

In one crowded carriage I saw a group of men, and, of course, one looked exactly like Philibert.

"You all right?" Martin asked, following my gaze.

"I'm fine," I said in the steadiest voice I could muster.

We were silent for a while, and finally Martin said, "Your master's a proud man."

Martin's simple comment said everything about my present circumstances: My deception had injured Philibert's pride and opened a rift between us. I understood too well how much my actions had cost him.

Even so, I had to try to reach him. I couldn't give up everything without even trying.

The emporium lay just ahead. A crowd had stopped to watch a puppet show, blocking the pathway. We joined them to view the shadows dancing on a white screen. But I couldn't concentrate. I kept thinking—hoping—that Philibert was somewhere nearby, that I'd run into him, though I wasn't sure what I'd say.

Martin stood by my side as we moved from stall to stall in the giant emporium. Tables were laden with spices, coffee, tobacco, rice, bright-colored fabrics, seashells and fruit. Finally my gaze stopped at a table filled with ladies' accessories, and I noticed a tiny silver mirror. We'd received half our wages during this stop at Batavia, so both of us had money. On a whim, I purchased the mirror.

Martin went off to buy food and drinks, and I stayed on a bench at the edge of the emporium. While I waited, I took my new mirror out of my bag and held it in front of me. If I'd seen my face in a crowd, I might not have recognized myself. I didn't look like a boy—or a girl—any more. I now had the face of a woman. Not that my features had actually changed but they had softened and matured. I dropped the mirror on my lap and closed my eyes.

Martin returned with a container of fried rice and sticks of grilled meat. I slipped my mirror back into my bag.

"It's getting too hot to be out and about," Martin said. I nodded.

"Don't want to ruin your fun, Professor. I know you been cabin-bound."

"Don't worry about me," I said. I've got a project to keep me busy. I've been doing a lot of painting, with all the canvas you gave me. Besides, I'm miserable in this heat."

* * *

Nobody was moving on deck when we climbed the ladder to the *Étoile* around noon. Men sat under sails or nested in hammocks to avoid the heat. It was as quiet as a plague ship.

Martin saw me to the entrance of officers' quarters. "Thank you for getting me off the ship," I said.

"We'll go again soon, Professor," he said, shaking my hand. "Friends are friends, no matter what."

As I stepped into officers' quarters, I nearly choked with sadness. I'd be saying goodbye to Martin soon. He'd been a true friend, the truest friend I could have wished for. Who would have guessed? The giant who once tormented me had become my guardian and closest mate. He'd come to my rescue countless times.

I took out the key to my cabin. My hand was sweaty, and the key slipped to the floor. I stooped over but couldn't find it in the shadowy passage.

And then, I heard someone coming down the companionway behind me. I knew instantly that it was Philibert, as I recognized his sure, confident gait. He was carry-

ing a small lantern, so I saw him as soon as he entered the hallway. Our eyes met. He looked surprised, or perhaps it was anger.

"I need to speak with you," he said curtly.

* * *

I followed Philibert though officers' quarters. We stopped at the galley by the entrance to the gun deck. It was small and public, but no one was there now, so it afforded momentary privacy. "I need your help with my work," Philibert said.

"You need my help?" I managed.

He nodded.

"Isn't Martin assisting you now?"

"Yes, Martin has been a great help, and he has tried his very best. I'm grateful for that. But," he hesitated, "but I need somebody who can anticipate my needs. You know what tools I need and when I need them. This expedition is coming to a close, and I cannot afford to lose a minute, not now." He spoke in a voice that was so matter-of-fact he might have been reading off a list of plants.

Philibert went on: "Martin is learning, but you know botany. You can prepare herbaria, make illustrations, and take detailed notes. Your knowledge and training are an asset to me and, therefore, critical to this expedition." He pursed his lips and looked down.

"I've spoken with Captain de Bougainville, and he's consented to let you accompany me on my plant-hunting trips for the remainder of our expedition. Martin will

always come along as well, for obvious reasons." His voice was cold and hard. He took a deep breath and shook his bent head. Finally, he looked up again, his face expressionless but his olive eyes lively, as always. "You are under no obligation," he said.

I knew Philibert expected a quick response, but I could hardly breathe. After a long pause, he repeated: "You are under no obligation."

"I would appreciate the opportunity to continue working with you, sir," I said, grateful that my voice had not broken. "Thank you. Thank you very much."

"All right, then we are agreed," he said, sounding as if he had just closed a bargain with a shopkeeper. "Tomorrow morning after breakfast, Martin, you, and I will make a trip to Batavia for the purpose of collecting plants."

And then, he turned on his heel and left the galley.

I listened to him walk away, as I tried take in our momentous meeting: I would be working with Philibert again, working at a job that I had missed terribly. He had spoken to me without a grain of sentiment. Yet he did say he needed me. I had heard the grudging tone of his voice. Yet he had asked me to join him. His offer was an acknowledgement: We shared a passion for botany.

I could hope again. But for what, I had no inkling.

CHAPTER 39.

Batavia, Isle of Java

October 15, 1768

One year, 33 weeks at sea

The past two weeks had been a flurry of work that occupied all my waking hours. I spent my days lugging equipment, canoeing, rowing, hiking; collecting, pressing, and sketching plants; filling herbaria, preparing notes, and making final illustrations. Our routine was the same every day: We woke before dawn, canoed from the *Étoile* to the wharf of Batavia, gathered our equipment, and set off for the hinterlands of Java by boat or on foot.

Today would be our final day in Java. This evening we planned to bring our herbaria back to the *Étoile*. Tomorrow the expedition would set sail for the Ile de France in the Indian Ocean, near Africa. That stop would bring us close to the end of our voyage. For now, I didn't dwell on my final destination.

At the moment, we were settled on an embankment by the Ciliwung River, which ran from the port through the heart of Batavia and into the interior of Java. Martin was cleaning and boxing our equipment. Philibert was taking notes and viewing specimens under a magnifying glass. I was sketching a plant from our day's collection.

My dealings with Philibert continued to be strictly formal: He gave Martin orders, and he gave me orders. We all did our business with little fuss.

"Martin, please add this herbaria to that box you're preparing," Philibert said.

"Yes, sir," Martin answered.

Philibert and Martin continued to talk, but I didn't look up from my drawing or even hear them. My efforts engrossed me and lifted my spirits. My world seemed to grow larger with each minute I spent at this task. During the weeks that I'd been restricted to my cabin, I had missed this employment more than anything in the world, even more than I missed Philibert. Which came as both a shock and a revelation to me. When I got back to France, I'd have to figure out some way to continue my botanizing, no matter what.

As a girl, I never had a chance to attend a real school or to go to a university, but I'd acquired an education by the side of the Botanist. I'd read most of the books in his cabin, and I'd taken to heart every word of botanic advice and information that poured from his lips. The knowledge I'd gained during our voyage would make me more of a misfit in my old home, but my accomplishments might lead to new opportunities. Maybe I could continue this work, after all, though I had no idea how. I knew I couldn't count on Philibert for help. That seemed out of the question.

The truth was: I had become something of a botanist myself, a colleague who Philibert did not look down on. My betrayal had hurt him deeply; even so, he had solicited my help.

I took pride in my learning and my new-found expertise. I remained ashamed of my masquerade but proud of my achievements. This poor potter's daughter had toiled devot-

edly to contribute to my master and to the expedition—and I had succeeded. Not just once but many times, Philibert had acknowledged my hard work, my skill, and my talent. Whatever might happen next in my life, I had contributed to his success. My efforts had made a difference.

When I finished sketching the plant, I placed it carefully between pressing blocks. Then I jotted some final notes. As I reached for another plant, I glanced at Philibert. He held a magnifying glass in his right hand. But he wasn't occupied with his plants. He was watching me intently with a familiar expression.

"Is there a problem, sir?" I asked boldly without thinking.

"No," he said, "no problem at all. You're working very hard—as always."

"Thank you, sir," I said.

"Thank you," he said, almost under his breath. And then he looked away.

Philibert's brief acknowledgement encouraged me to speak up. I'd been looking for a chance, any chance, to reconnect with him and seek reconciliation. This seemed to be my moment.

"Sir, I truly appreciate this opportunity to work with you, and I want you to know how much I regret any hurt I caused you. I only hope you can forgive me."

The blood seemed to leave Philibert's face. He stood and moved my way. "You lied to me," he said, his voice trembling with anger. "You lied to me for two years. You pretended to be someone you were not. I took you into my confidence. I watched out for you. I taught you everything you know about botany, and you repaid me with lies and deceit."

By now he was nearly shouting. "No one, no one in my life has ever betrayed me as completely as you did. Do you think I would let you work with me now if I weren't desperate? I only solicited your help again because I have to finish everything before I reach the Ile de France."

Philibert paused and glanced at Martin who was looking on with alarm. Then he bent over me, lowering his voice to an angry whisper. "Otherwise I would have made do with Martin."

"Sir," I said, preparing to defend myself.

"Don't you dare speak to me about this again," he said. "I have not recovered from your betrayal. I won't forgive you now, and I never will." With that, he turned his back on me and walked away.

The force of Philibert's rage caught me off guard and stunned me into silence. He had come to me for help, we had been working together for two weeks, and I mistook his acknowledgement of my hard work as a sign that he was ready to forgive me.

Now I understood that it was not a sign of anything. It was just a scientist's observation: *You're working very hard—as always*. It meant nothing more than that. Even so, I had seen something more in Philibert's expression when he said it, a flash of appreciation before his rage.

He wasn't ready to forgive me yet, and maybe he never would be. But I had seen that expression again, and *I* wasn't ready to forget it.

CHAPTER 40.

Port Louis
Isle de France
October 26, 1768

The *Étoile* was anchored at Port Louis on the Isle de France in the Indian Ocean. Philibert would be debarking here shortly. We had barely spoken since leaving Batavia two weeks ago. In a few minutes, I would turn over my last illustrations and notes to him, and my service as botanist's assistant would end.

Tomorrow, the *Étoile* would set sail for the Cape of Good Hope, and I would be back in France before Christmas. I would realize my dream and my goal — to be the first woman ever to circle the Earth. My paintings of our voyage would also be finished. I could always look at that record of my achievements and remember everything.

The canvas panels covered every inch of my tiny cabin. Soon they would be the only evidence that I'd taken part in this great adventure. I had painted scenes of plant collecting on the Rio de la Platte and Rio de Janeiro, the jaguar hunt in Montevideo, whales swimming near the Strait of Magellan, our Christmas ship covered in ribbons in the Strait, our sad meeting with the Fuegians and the angel-boy who ate glass and lost his life. There were pictures of Bandit bringing me a rat, Philibert dissecting

fish, Michel with Pockets, Donat with Voltaire, and Captain de Bougainville holding the majestic bougainvillea. I had painted Jacques Jacain climbing the spar with me my first time aloft and Henri and Gérard fixing a nasty stew. On my panels, Aotourou stood outside his Tahitian house, Martin read a book, and Captain Giraudais gazed from his command on the quarterdeck, Lieutenant Caro by his side. In a final tribute to Philibert, I'd painted every flower from my sketchbook, hundreds of them, along the upper edge of every panel. Perusing the canvases made me proud of my accomplishments but also reminded me of my uncertain future and the difficult challenges lying ahead.

Now it was time to give Philibert his sketches and my final work. But I wouldn't say goodbye looking like a boy. Though I'd learned the ways of men—and proved myself worthy as one—I wasn't a boy or even a man. At long last, I would face Philibert as a woman, as myself, as the real Jeanne Baret.

I pulled my dress from my bag, laid it on top of my cot, and smoothed out the blue cotton. I hadn't even looked at the dress since Montevideo, a full year ago. Today I would wear it.

First I washed my face with a fresh bucket of water that Martin had fetched from Port Louis. Then I took my brush from my bag. My hair fell below my chin, nearly to my shoulders. I began to brush, counting fifty strokes, then fifty more. It brought me back to that day in Rochefort Inn, nearly two years ago, when I cut my hair. Was it still beautiful?

I dug through my bag and pulled out the mirror from Batavia. My hair glistened with many shades of gold. It *was* still beautiful. My nose and jaw finally fit my grown-up face. My lips seemed full and womanly. And my eyes, my

soft brown eyes, appeared larger and wiser than ever. True, I didn't have my mother's blue eyes or her delicate, ethereal beauty. Mine was sensual and earthy.

I slipped off my shirt and pants and lifted the lacy dress over my head. When I glanced down, I was disappointed: The cotton was creased and faded. I took off my boots and put on my leather slippers. Finally, I picked up those last illustrations, my notes, and a herbarium of plants from Batavia.

When I reached my door I couldn't move. I closed my eyes as sadness, regret, hope, and pride flooded over me. All the joy and disappointment of the past two years had converged in this one moment. I took a deep breath. And then I stepped through my doorway, walked down the hall, and stopped at Philibert's cabin. I stood in front of his door, fortifying myself to go on. When I heard footsteps on the companionway behind me, I knocked.

"Come in," Philibert ordered. He was seated at his desk working on some papers, his back to the hallway.

As I opened the door, Bandit brushed past me and jumped onto Philibert's bed. It was stripped bare now and empty except for a huge trunk. On top of the trunk were small bowls of water and food for our cat. Boxes and crates crowded the cabin from floor to ceiling. My old cot was hidden under cases of herbaria. Philibert was packed and ready to leave for the *Ile de France*.

"I've brought the last of my work, sir," I said, stepping toward him.

Philibert turned, looked at me, and, almost imperceptibly, he gasped. His gaze turned quickly to his hands.

"I know that you're getting off in Port Louis," I said, "and I won't be seeing you again. But before you leave I wanted to thank you."

Philibert glanced up and cast me a tight smile.

"I also want to tell you again how sorry I am for the terrible trouble my deception has caused you. I understand why you can't forgive me, and I don't expect you to, but I do want you to know that I never meant to hurt you. "

Philibert's didn't respond, and I had expected that he wouldn't. He'd made it clear that he didn't want to hear my apology.

I moved toward the door, but before I reached it he spoke. "As I told you a few weeks ago, I still haven't gotten over your betrayal. That has not changed."

Philibert's words made me blush with shame and cleared my head at the same time. This might be a chance, my only chance, to explain myself and make him understand. I turned to answer him. I had committed a speech to memory, but now that I was standing in front of him, it slipped away.

I began to speak, willing the perfect words to come. "I regret that I had to deceive you, sir," I said, "*but—*"

"But?" he interrupted with animosity in his voice. His face had hardened into an angry mask, though his olive eyes were still warm and lively. "How can there be any 'but'? I opened up a whole new world for you, and you repaid me with treachery."

"Sir, I regret that I had to deceive you, *but* I don't regret what I did. I don't regret leaving France to join this expedition. I don't regret learning botany. I don't regret having my eyes opened to a whole new world. And I certainly don't regret meeting you."

Philibert gasped with annoyance. "We were comrades," he said, "*but* our comradeship was built on a lie." He shook his head. "It's a miracle that your selfish masquerade

didn't sink the whole expedition—along with my reputation. It might have doomed everything."

I felt oddly calm and self-confident, as I answered. "Yes, sir, I understand now that I subjected everyone to grave risk. I know it could have set off a disastrous mutiny. But it didn't, sir. The expedition was a resounding success, and I had a role in that success, no matter that it was minor. I'm deeply sorry my actions hurt you. But, I can't be sorry for what I did. I won't apologize for that."

"*But*," he said. "It was all based on a lie."

"No sir, not everything was a lie. I discovered that I have ambition, too, just like you. And I discovered that I love botany more than anything. In fact, your ambition and your love of botany ignited mine."

Philibert shook his head again and frowned. "You had your ambition, and I had mine, but the fact remains that you deceived me. I never had to lie to achieve my goals."

"Pardon me, sir, but that's just the point. I *had* to lie to achieve mine. Would you have ever considered taking me with you, if you'd known what you know now? How was a girl like me supposed to fulfill my longings? The truth is the only way I could have done this, the only way we could have known each other, is by my lying."

He grimaced and sighed, a bitter smile betraying his pain. "You must have enjoyed a quiet laugh at my expense."

"In the beginning, I did congratulate myself for getting past everyone—not just you but the crew, the officers, everyone. It was a challenge, and honestly it didn't seem real those first few days. It was more like a dream, a thrilling dream. I was exhilarated to be a boy for a change. I loved my new-found freedom. For once in my life, I had prospects. For once, I had a chance to get an education,

to learn about science and philosophy and history. I never wanted that to end. But there was another side to it.

"The farther along we went, and the better I got to know you, the worse I felt about deceiving you. Every day I paid a price for my deception in guilt—and misery, and I am still paying for it."

When I stopped to catch my breath, I could see that Philibert had been listening closely and was waiting for me to go on.

"I've seen the world," I continued, "and I've acquired knowledge and experience in botany. With everything I know I could do so much, but that doesn't count now, none of it counts for a woman like me. The world applauds the risks and challenges taken by great men. But me, I'm going to be vilified for my daring. Do you believe that's fair, sir? Do you really believe that's fair?"

Philibert pursed his lips and did not respond, but he was still looking at me intently, waiting for me to go on.

"I don't even know if my family will help me after all this," I said, the words pouring from me. "I haven't heard from them in two years. They may disown me. But no matter what happens, sir, I can't say that I'm sorry for *everything*. I'll still go down as the first woman who circled the Earth, and I did it in a trusted role that advanced the world's learning. I'm proud of my accomplishments, sir. I'll always be proud of what I did with you.

"And I'm not done, sir. I'm still not done. I love botany, and I won't give it up. I won't go back to my old life. I'll figure out something before I get back to France. I know I'll figure out something."

Philibert nodded. "I have to admit, you've become quite the debater," he said.

He paused and, for a brief moment, I felt hope: It seemed that I had reached him. I took a small, uncertain breath.

And then he frowned. "*But* the fact remains, this whole thing was based on a lie."

I started to answer, but I had nothing more to say. My effort to reach him had failed, after all. My lips quivered. I didn't want to cry, but I couldn't move.

And then a smile creased Philibert's mouth. "But, I have to admit, I am impressed with your argument."

I wiped a tear and suppressed a grin at the same time.

"You've impressed me on more than one occasion, Jeanne," he said. "You know that, don't you?"

Now I was smiling, despite my effort to contain my emotions. "Your encouragement always motivated me to learn more and to work harder, sir."

"We will have more time to discuss this further when we go on with our work," he said.

"Our work?"

"Yes, we'll go on to the Ile de France together. You know that it's a great center of French botany, don't you?"

"Of course, sir."

"The fact is I'll need an assistant now, more than ever."

"You need me, sir?"

"I'll need your help for the duration. The job is still there if you want it."

"Yes, I want it terribly, sir, *but*—" I hesitated.

"But what now?" he asked.

"*But*, your reputation, sir."

"I know half the expedition thinks I was in on your secret all along," he said.

"And I regret that deeply, sir."

"Well, you should," he said. "This scandal will be hanging over my head for the duration of my life—and it will follow me to the grave. No matter what I do, it will be a footnote to all my accomplishments."

"If I go on to Port Louis with you, won't that keep the rumors alive?" I asked.

"Well, I guess I can manage a little gossip. It takes the curse off being a boring old botanist, doesn't it? Besides, it's not as if I'm the first Frenchman to weather a minor scandal."

We both laughed, and our laughter brought me back to the first time we'd laughed together aboard the *Étoile*, when Philibert made a joke about how little we knew of ship life. Everything had changed since then, in a million unexpected ways, but we were still laughing together.

"I plan to bid farewell to Captain Giraudais this afternoon," Philibert said, as our laughter subsided. "That doesn't give you much time to prepare for our departure."

"I always travel lightly," I said casting an ironic look around his crowded cabin. "It won't take me long to pack up my things and make arrangements to leave." Philibert nodded his approval and laughed again, as I turned toward the door.

I slipped into the officers' hallway, feeling as if afloat. I drifted past my cabin and up the small companionway to the quarterdeck, hardly aware of where I was heading. My mind was on Philibert and this sudden, wonderful turn of events. I moved toward the railing on the quarterdeck, hoping to clear my head. Both the quarterdeck and deck were nearly empty, as most of the crew was on leave at Port Louis.

Very soon, I'd be leaving, too, leaving the *Étoile* for

good. My throat tightened at the thought of my final farewell, so near at hand.

"Mademoiselle Baret," a familiar voice called from across the quarterdeck, interrupting my reverie. It was Caro, who was staring at me with an alarmed expression. "You know you're not *ever* supposed to come here unattended," he said, "and especially in such attire."

"I am so sorry, Lieutenant. To tell you the truth, I forgot myself. I just received the most amazing offer. Monsieur Commerson has invited me to continue as his assistant on the *Ile de France*. I'm trying to take it in. I can hardly believe I'm not dreaming.

"This isn't a dream, is it, Lieutenant?"

Caro laughed. "No, Mademoiselle, you're not dreaming. Congratulations, that is wonderful news. You deserve some good news."

"Thank you, sir," I said. "I'm sorry I wandered out here alone like this. It's just that I was saying goodbye to the *Étoile*. Maybe you'll think I'm just a foolish woman, but I've felt all along like she was a kind old friend who was always watching over me."

"No, you don't sound foolish at all," he said. "The *Étoile* has been a friend to our entire crew. She's kept us safe and sound from a million disasters that have befallen other sailors. To my mind, we should all be grateful.

"So, go ahead and say goodbye, Mademoiselle. But don't dally for long. Our crew and our captain are away for now, but they'll be back here soon. I'm afraid you'll cause a ruckus if they see you like that. It's a good thing nobody saw you like that before." He shook his head and laughed softly. "No matter how far and wide I travel or for how long, I'll never forget this voyage."

He took my hand and held it between his. "And I'll certainly never forget you."

He squeezed my hand with affection and then strode to the companionway and down to the deck.

My gaze turned toward the harbor. A few ships were anchored near the *Étoile*. Canoes and boats glided through the turquoise water toward the white-sanded shore. Palm trees swayed in the wind. In the distance, grassy knolls rolled like waves into emerald hills that flowed toward distant, cloud-topped mountains.

Just yesterday, I had feared that my adventure was about to end. Now I realized that I was about to start a new adventure. Soon, I would be exploring the hills, valleys, woods, and plains of this new paradise—with Philibert. If all went well here, I would join him in France afterwards. I would see his home and get to know Archambault and become his son's teacher. He might even bring me to Paris, finally, and take me to see theater, opera, and a real university. Maybe he'd even introduce me to the great Voltaire.

Yes, my new adventure was just beginning. All of my hopes were still alive, after all. I could still dream.

AFTERWORD

Historical Perspectives on the Relationship of Jeanne Baret and Philibert Commerson

In *A voyage Round the World*, published in 1771, Louis-Antoine de Bougainville reported briefly on his encounter with Jeanne Baret:

When I came on board the Étoile, Baret, with her face bathed in tears, owned to me that she was a woman; she said that she had deceived her master at Rochefort, by offering to serve him in men's clothes at the very moment when he was embarking. . . . I must do her the justice to affirm that she has always behaved on board with most scrupulous modesty.

De Bougainville's report became the official French position concerning Jeanne Baret's presence aboard the *Étoile*. Pasfield Oliver, the author of Commerson's 1909 biography, chose to "add no comment whatsoever to this extraordinary story."

Other early accounts of the expedition argued that Jeanne Baret knew Philibert Commerson before they set out together on their adventure. Contemporary historians support this view and maintain they shared a romantic relationship.

But *The Secret of Jeanne Baret* is Jeanne Baret's story—and a fictional account, at that, so it follows the official line. It is told from Jeanne Baret's point of view, as she might

have recounted her adventure to a teenage Archambault Commerson.

* * *

Stay tuned for Volume II of *The Bougainville Expedition*. The second volume offers multiple perspectives concerning the relationship of Philibert Commerson and Jeanne Baret. While volume II focuses on other lives, it does follow up on their story.

A SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY, with annotations

In the course of researching and writing this novel, I've read hundreds of books and articles on world history, French history, maritime history, geography, philosophy, sailing and navigation, botany, and astronomy. The ten most influential books are listed below (in order of their importance to me), with annotations.

Louis Antoine de Bougainville *A Voyage Round the World*, (Da Capo Press, New York, 1967) Captain de Bougainville's meticulous account of the first French circumnavigation, originally published in 1772, provided an indispensable guide for plotting and writing my novel.

Captain S. Pasfield Oliver, *The Life of Philibert Commerson: D.M., Naturaliste du Roi, An Old-World Story of French Travel and Science in the Days of Linnaeus* (John

Murray, London, 1909) This biography offers rich detail and insight into the life, loves, and obsessions of one of the world's greatest botanists.

Olwen Hufton, *The Prospect Before Her: A History of Women in Western Europe, Volume One 1500–1800* (Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1996) Hufton's wide-ranging history provides eye-opening insights into the diminished lives and limited opportunities of European women born before 1800.

Tyler Whittle, *The Plant Hunters* (Chilton Book Company, Philadelphia, 1970) This comprehensive history of botanic explorers brings to light Philibert Commerçon's contribution to botanic exploration and his place—with Carl Linnaeus and John Bartram—in the pantheon of botanists from the "Golden Age of Botany"

Gilles Proulx, *Between France and New France: Life Aboard the Tall Sailing Ships*, (Dundurn Press Limited, Toronto, 1984) Proulx's invaluable maritime reference documents numerous facets of ship life on a French vessel from port activities, to ship hierarchy, to crew-members' duties and pay, to sleeping quarters, to discipline, to meals and recreation.

John Dunmore *Storms and Dreams: Louis De Bougainville: Soldier, Explorer, Statesman* (Exisle Publishing Limited, Auckland, 2005) This biography, by the distinguished historian and expert in French Pacific exploration, brings to life the story of Captain de Bougainville, the great polymath, soldier, statesman and seaman.

The Enlightenment: A Comprehensive Anthology, Peter Gay, editor , (Simon & Schuster, Inc., New York, 1973) This overview offers biographies and excerpts of the precursors and practitioners—both luminaries and lesser-known figures—who created an international revolution in philosophy that changed the world .

Dava Sobel, *Longitude* (Walker & Company, New York, 1995) Sobel's lively account tells the history of "the longitude problem," the great scientific puzzle of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that occupied many of the most celebrated minds of the day.

Anne Salmond, *Alphrodite's Island: The European Discovery of Tahiti* (University of California Press, Los Angeles, 2009) Salmond's history describes the European discovery of Tahiti in the late eighteenth century and the impact of European contact on Tahitian life and culture. It offers insights and details about this significant stopover during the Bougainville expedition.

James Bennie, *Alphabet of Botany* (Peter Hill, New York, 1833) This little educational handbook offers insight into botanic knowledge and education before the development of modern microscopes, cell theory, and microbiology changed our scientific understanding of plants.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I worked on *The Secret of Jeanne Baret* for many years and received generous support from countless friends and colleagues. I apologize to anyone I've overlooked.

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I solicited the counsel of two seafaring women, who read my book for maritime accuracy. Eliza Garfield, former Captain of the *Amistad* (an educational vessel), read an early version of my book for verisimilitude. Stephanie

Katz, a first mate on numerous ships, read a late-late draft and helped to correct some nautical errors. Stephanie also offered astute literary advice.

Last but not least, I thank my daughters Nicki Strahinich and Vanessa Aponte, my early inspiration for writing about a real-life adventuress with big dreams and amazing grit.







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THE SECRET *of* JEANNE BARET

In 1767, Jeanne Baret, a French girl, disguised herself as a boy and signed up as botanist's assistant aboard an exploration ship bound for the South Pacific with 200 crewmen. **THE SECRET OF JEANNE BARET** is the true, untold story of the first woman ever to circumnavigate the Earth. This real-life adventuress with big dreams and amazing grit had been lost to history. . . until now.



Helen Strahinich has written hundreds of short stories, nonfiction articles, novellas, and poems for children and young adults during a twenty-five-year career in education publishing. *The Secret of Jeanne Baret* is her first novel. Strahinich lives in Boston with her husband John, four cats, a turtle, and a Chihuahua named Lola.

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